

## Drug prescriptions confuse many users

June 27 2011, By Blythe Bernhard

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When pharmacies, doctors' offices and homes were destroyed by the tornado in Joplin, Mo., so were the medication records of many patients. Pharmacists who helped out report that many people could not recall the names of their prescription drugs or the dosages they were taking.

"We talk to them about what they're on, they say 'I want that little red pill,' said Roger Prock, a pharmacist from Lee's Summit, Mo., who has been working at a Target pharmacy in Joplin once a week since the tornado hit.

Prock said he wasn't really surprised by people's lack of drug knowledge, since "a number of people even in good times don't know what they're on."

The advent of [electronic medical records](#) has helped with keeping track, but they're not always available. And it's not just tornadoes that can wipe out a person's drug records. People can be left without their prescriptions if their luggage is lost or they're in an accident, Prock said.

"They should have a list of the drugs in their purse," he said. "Maybe more people will think about it and do it now."

The Institute of Medicine estimates that 90 million Americans have trouble comprehending health information, including prescription [drug labels](#) and instructions. That can cause serious problems: more than 700,000 emergency room trips each year are caused by prescription drug mix-ups.

Confusion is understandable when brand-name drugs for different conditions often have similar names - like Fosomax (osteoporosis) and Flomax (enlarged prostate), Avinza (pain) and Evista (osteoporosis).

Another common problem, pharmacists say, is when doctors switch to a generic version of a prescription drug but the patient also keeps taking the brand-name drug, inadvertently giving themselves a double dose.

[Natural disasters](#) might put a spotlight on this problem, but they're not the cause, said Arthur Culbert, president of [Health Literacy](#) Missouri, a nonprofit based in St. Louis.

The average American reads at about a seventh-grade level, while prescription drug information is written at an 11th or 12th grade level.

"We in this country are given information around drug medication that we just simply don't understand," Culbert said.

A campaign from Health Literacy Missouri starting this fall will help people organize and understand their medications. The group has designed a bag that people can put their drugs in and take to their doctor. The bag will include pictures and easy-to-understand language about how important it is to keep track of your prescriptions. People can write down their drugs and dosages to keep in the bag.

The bags will be distributed at senior centers, libraries and pharmacies.

Patients should get in the habit of practicing drug reconciliation, or taking all their medicines to a doctor to get them checked out. Doctors can check for expiration dates, duplicates and adverse interactions.

Culbert also suggests people keep a planner with medical and drug records on them at all times. They should make a copy of the list of

drugs and keep that somewhere safe.

"Most consumers of health do not do that," Culbert said. "If you can write down what you have ... you would really be ahead of the game."

## **AVOIDING DRUG ERRORS**

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration offers these tips to avoid prescription drug errors:

**Know medicine names** - Make sure the drug name the doctor prescribed matches the one given by the pharmacist. With refills, confirm the drug is the same color, size, shape and packaging. Ask about any changes.

**Ask and ask some more** - Get information about the drug, including side effects, potential drug or vitamin interactions, storage, what to do if a dose is forgotten and whether the drug should be timed with meals.

**What is this for?** - Understand what the medication is used to treat. People who understand their drugs are more likely to take them correctly and know when problems arise.

**Read labels, follow directions** - Know how much of the drug to take, when and for how long. Re-check the label each time to make sure it's the right drug.

**Talk to your doc** - Show and tell your doctors about all the medicines, vitamins and supplements you take. Keep a list and bring it to every appointment, or better yet, bring the drugs in a bag.

**Write this down** - Keep a list of your prescriptions with you, stash another copy at home and give a third copy to a friend or family member.

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