

Help Prevent Medication Incidents

A component of the Canadian Medication Incident Reporting and Prevention System (CMIRPS).

Volume 3, Issue 1

Alert

February 6, 2012

Take Steps to Prevent Mix-ups between Family Members' Medicines at Home

SafeMedicationUse.ca has received a report about a consumer accidentally taking a family member's medicines at home. Two spouses were using pill organizers to help them keep track of their medicines. One spouse took medicines from the other spouse's pill organizer, thinking they were his own. Some of the medicines being taken by these two people were identical, but some were not. A family member called the consumers' pharmacist, who helped them to sort out the problem. The pharmacist reviewed a list of each spouse's medication to see which medicines the consumer had already taken and which ones were still needed. The pharmacist then provided the family with advice on which medicines the consumer should and should not take for the rest of the day.

You might think that a mistake like this could happen only to someone who is elderly or confused. In fact, a mix-up between family members' medicines can happen to anyone. Fortunately, this mistake did not cause any lasting harm. However, taking someone else's medicine could have serious consequences. SafeMedicationUse.ca has some suggestions on how you can prevent mix-ups between the medicines of family members at home.

- Store family members' medicines in different locations or in separate baskets. It is important to choose a safe location to store each person's medicine, out of reach of children or any family member who may become confused.
- Ideally, leave medicines in their original containers. Before taking any medicine, check the label of the container carefully to be sure that the medicine you are taking is intended for you.
- Pill organizers can help you to keep track of your medicines, but extra care is required when medicines are removed from their original containers. Be familiar with the appearance of your medicines. You can also ask your pharmacist to help you prepare a written schedule with a description of each medicine. That way, you can check your medicines against the schedule before you take a dose.
- If more than one family member is using a pill organizer, consider choosing different colours or brands of organizers. Another way to help prevent mistakes is to make sure that each organizer is labelled with the owner's name.
- If you are having trouble keeping track of your medicines, talk to a healthcare professional. You can also ask your pharmacist whether it is possible to have your medicines specially prepared in properly labelled blister packs or pill organizers.