A bitter pill to swallow

Are you at risk of overdosing? Hundreds of thousands of Australians end up in hospital every year due to misuse of their prescribed medications. Here’s how to mitigate the danger and be smart about your pills.

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Consider this scenario. After a long day digging, weeding and maintaining the garden, your lower back is killing you. A hot bath doesn’t relieve the pain so you poke around the medicine cabinet looking for that packet of pills your doctor prescribed that helped you through an injury six months ago.

There it is! Endone, an opioid pain reliever containing oxycodone (classified as a drug of addiction). You pop two and pour yourself a large glass of shiraz as you make dinner. Then another glass. Next it’s time to take your antidepressant. And perhaps a cold and flu tablet (often containing codeine, a ‘weak opioid’) for your scratchy throat.

In itself, this one-off incident combining opioids, alcohol and antidepressants might prove harmless – but it is just one example of how...
“The more prescription medicines people take and then supplement with over-the-counter medicines, the more potential exists for medicine safety issues to occur.”

RENAE BEARDMORE
Pharmaceutical Society of Australia

BE HONEST
Doctors rely on their patients telling them the whole truth, warts and all. If you’re exceeding recommended alcohol guidelines or consuming cannabis, you need to tell your doctor.

DON’T STOCKPILE
You can take your expired or unwanted medicines back to any local pharmacy across Australia to dispose of free of charge, thanks to the RUM Project (Return Unwanted Medicines), a government backed, non-profit initiative.

LISTEN TO THE EXPERTS
Pharmaceutical drugs are basically safe and effective as long as they are used as advised. Honest conversations with your doctor are vitally important and they’re not the conversations people are having enough of.

“Older Australians are more at risk of having a chronic pain condition and of using medications in higher numbers, particularly medications that put them at risk of an accidental overdose,” she adds. “Pain medications such as opioids combined with antidepressants or antipsychotics – the risk of overdose goes up dramatically.”

John Ryan, CEO of the Penington Institute, which seeks to improve community safety in relation to drugs, agrees: “Not everyone that uses prescription opioids becomes addicted, but there is a risk, particularly with people who have pre-existing mental health issues. They’re more vulnerable to developing a dependency on those medications and that’s problematic.”

So what happens if you think you fall into this category, or you care for someone who does? A recent pilot program called ‘Take-home Naloxone’ made the life-saving drug, Naloxone, free and available without prescription in three states (NSW, South Australia and Western Australia) for people who are at risk of an opioid overdose. Naloxone can temporarily reverse the dangerous respiratory depressant effects of an opioid overdose, or adverse reaction, if administered by carers, friends or family members while waiting for paramedics to arrive.

Learning how to spot a potential overdose is just as important as having the tools to deal with it. “In an extreme situation, it’s someone you simply can’t wake up,” says John. “They might be snoring unusually. People make the mistake of thinking, ‘Oh, they’re just sleeping it off,’ but unusual snoring is one of the big signs of overdose.

“Call the ambulance,” he advises. “Do not hesitate to call 000. People often don’t call 000 because they don’t want to cause trouble or they don’t think it is a serious enough issue. Ideally, you will have Naloxone on hand to administer until paramedics arrive.”

“Have spoken to lots of people who didn’t ring 000 because they didn’t want to escalate the problem and now they live with that regret because someone has passed away from an unintentional overdose. Treat it with the gravity it deserves. It is a life and death situation,” says John.

Developments in technology, such as the Real Time Prescription Monitoring (RTPM) system, can help ensure better patient outcomes. RTPM is a national system designed to monitor the prescribing and dispensing of controlled medicines with the aim of reducing their misuse and limiting ‘prescription shopping’ or ‘doctor shopping’. It provides information to doctors and pharmacists about a patient’s history and use of controlled medications.

RTPM systems, including the pioneering SafeScript in Victoria, are now being rolled out across the country, producing real-time alerts and information for health professionals. The program is supported by advocacy groups including ScriptWise, which was founded in 2014 by Kim Ledger, father of the late Australian actor Heath.

“Heath’s passing really just highlights what is happening everywhere,” Kim told the ABC in 2017. “In Heath’s case, he mixed drugs for a chest infection with sleeping tablets and that is literally what slowed his system down sufficiently enough to put him to sleep forever.” Real-time monitoring would have helped [the doctors] know that he had previously got drugs from somewhere else in New York for argument’s sake, and would have been able to give the doctors an opportunity to counsel.”

Source: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of NSW.