

# Healthy Steps to Medications

From your friends at Blue Care Network

## When do you count grapefruit as a medication?

The title of this article is not a trick question. Grapefruit can trigger serious side effects if you're taking certain prescription drugs, such as medications to lower cholesterol, tranquilizers, antidepressants, antiseizure medications and Viagra.

Drugs are powerful substances that affect your body — and each other. One drug may reduce, increase or even neutralize the effects of another. Some cold medications can interact with blood pressure drugs, causing a drop in blood pressure. Herbal remedies, which many consumers tend to view as harmless, can actually trigger drug interactions. Ginkgo biloba, for example, can cause excessive bleeding if taken with aspirin.

Food is also a concern because it can speed or slow how medications work. Even taking a fiber supplement too close to when you take the drug can affect how the body breaks the medication down.

### Play it safe

- Make sure you ask your doctor questions. What is the medication used for? How should I take it and for how long? If you are told to take a medication three times a day, make sure you understand if you should take it exactly eight hours apart or when you eat your meals.
- Make sure all your doctors know all your prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, herbs and supplements.
- Label your medications so you won't mix them up. Put a yellow sticky note on the medication you take for your blood pressure and a pink one on the one for your depression.
- Buy a pillbox that separates pills by days and time of day.
- For all over-the-counter drugs you take, be sure you understand how and when to take them and what medicines they may interact with.
- Read labels for your medicines, supplements and over-the-counter drugs. This can help remind you of drug warnings or potential side effects. Sometimes new warnings may be listed in the packet insert.
- Keep a written record of your medical history and medications, and carry it with you.

## Choose an herbal supplement with care

Federal law requires manufacturers of dietary supplements to ensure that the products they market are safe. But the Food and Drug Administration does not review and approve supplement ingredients prior to their marketing. How can you know what to buy?

- Don't assume all herbal products on the market are safe. Look for standardized herbal supplements. The U.S. Pharmacopeia's "USP Dietary Supplement Verified" seal indicates the supplement has met certain manufacturing standards. These standards include testing the product for uniformity, cleanliness and freedom from environmental contaminants.
- Beware of claims that sound too good to be true. No one herbal supplement can do it all.
- Be cautious about herbal supplements manufactured outside the United States. Toxic ingredients and prescription drugs have been found in some herbal supplements manufactured in other countries.

# Make the Match

Medicines have powerful ingredients that can interact dangerously with other medicines (prescription and over-the-counter), herbal supplements and certain foods. Draw a line matching each potentially dangerous drug mix on the left with its effect on the right.

Medication mix	Combination may
Blood thinner like warfarin (Coumadin®) taken with ginkgo biloba ●	● Cause tiredness and slow reactions
Garlic pills, ginkgo, St. John's wort taken with any medication ●	● Cause excessive bleeding
Eating spinach, which has vitamin K, while taking a blood thinner like warfarin (Coumadin) ●	● Reverse the desired effect and increase clotting
Alcohol and drugs ●	● Reduces the effectiveness of the drug

(Answer key on this page.)

## Resources

### BCN prescription coverage based on a formulary

The BCN formulary is a regularly updated list of medications that have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration and reviewed by the BCBSM and BCN Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee. Medications in the formulary offer cost-effective quality treatment. Each of the three tiers in the formulary represents a different copayment level.

- **Formulary Preferred (Tier 1):** These drugs have a proven record of effectiveness and require the lowest copayment. Most generic drugs fall into Tier 1.
- **Formulary Options (Tier 2):** These drugs also have a proven record of effectiveness, but have a more cost-effective alternative (such as a generic version). Tier 2 drugs have a higher copayment.
- **Nonformulary (Tier 3):** Tier 3 drugs are not on our approved list. These drugs may not have a proven record for safety or their clinical value may not be as high as the drugs in Tier 1 and Tier 2. Formulary alternatives are available. Most BCN members do not have coverage for Tier 3 drugs unless the doctor and BCN agree that the drug is medically necessary.

For a Member Quick Guide and a complete list of drugs included on our formulary, go to [MiBCN.com/drugformulary](http://MiBCN.com/drugformulary). You can also request these lists by calling the Customer Service number on the back of your ID card.

## It's a fact...

### Generics are brand-name equivalents

The FDA requires generic drugs to use the same active ingredients as brand-name drugs and work the same way. Here are some other facts to know:

- Trademark laws do not allow the generic drug to look exactly like the brand-name drug. Colors, flavors and certain other parts may be different. However, the generic drug must have the same active ingredients.
- Generic drugs work in the same way and in the same amount of time as brand-name drugs.
- Generic drugs cost less because generic drug makers do not develop a drug from scratch. The costs to bring the drug to market are therefore less.

- Answer key to Make the Match
- Taken with aspirin or ginkgo biloba, blood thinners like warfarin (Coumadin) may cause excessive bleeding.
- Foods that contain vitamin K, which helps the blood to clot, interfere with the action of a blood thinner.
- The combination of alcohol with some drugs may cause tiredness or slowed reactions.
- Supplements that can reduce the effectiveness of medications are: anise, dong quai, omega 3-fatty acids in fish oil, garlic pills, ginkgo, St. John's wort, American ginseng, vitamin E, alfalfa.