

Better drug-risk warnings needed

Drug labels can be confusing, even for doctors. Our recent spot-check of prescription-bottle labels and patient-information sheets from five chain pharmacies near our offices in Yonkers, N.Y., found inconsistent or missing warnings about side effects. And a study in the May 23, 2011, issue of the Archives of Internal Medicine highlighted another potential problem with information for drug prescribers: too many warnings.

The study examined 5,600 manufacturers' labels and found that the average number of warnings about adverse events had increased by 32 percent over the last 50 years.

Almost 600 labels had more than 150 warnings about side effects and adverse events, and 84 had more than 300. "The medications that are most commonly prescribed have an average of about 100

side effects per drug," said the study's lead author, Jon Duke, M.D., an assistant professor at the Indiana University School of Medicine. New drugs might have longer warning labels due to results from larger clinical trials and manufacturers fearing litigation.

The sheer volume of the warnings could induce information overload for doctors, researchers said. Beyond side effects, when doctors prescribe, they should also consider age, overall health, drug allergies, and other potential drug interactions. Some physicians might ignore warnings that are vague or hard to interpret. Confusion surfaces in consumer leaflets from pharmacies, too, where lengthy lists of warnings can discourage patients from using a necessary drug.

"The current state of affairs makes it almost impossible for the consumer to know if the adverse drug reaction is rel-

evant for them," says B. Joseph Guglielmo, Pharm.D., chairman of the clinical pharmacy department at the University of California at San Francisco School of Pharmacy, who wrote a commentary accompanying the study.

Bottom line. Patients and prescribers deserve drug information that clearly explains which risks are most important and which are least likely to be a problem. Don't try to interpret the warnings alone. Ask your doctor or pharmacist:

- Which side effects are most likely?
- Which are not likely but serious?
- Which should concern you the most?
- When should you call your doctor or stop taking the drug?

When starting a new prescription, discuss with your physician or pharmacist the drugs and supplements you already take, and any chronic health conditions or allergies you have. ■



One-minute consult

Buying supplements safely



Philip J. Gregory,
Pharm.D., editor, Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database, an independent research organization.

So a friend recommends a dietary supplement. How do I find out if it's safe and effective?

Ideally, you'd talk to a trusted health professional, like your pharmacist, physician, or dietitian. In reality, some have not had the time or inclination to learn about supplements. Some dismiss all supplements. And some are advocates who sell products in their practice to make money. Seek out a health professional in the middle, who can advise knowledgeably but doesn't have an agenda.

If my doctor or pharmacist can't help, can I find good information online?

Reliable sources are few and far between. Medline Plus (nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus), the National Library of Medicine's consumer portal, carries our information for many supplements, and ConsumerReportsHealth.org has our guide to 200 commonly used supplements. You can also find some good information from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (nccam.nih.gov). If you are looking at a product with five or 10 different ingredients, you can almost guarantee that the specific combination of ingredients has never been studied. Generally, I lean towards staying away from products

with a long list of ingredients for exactly that reason.

How can I make sure I'm buying a good-quality brand?

We now have "good manufacturing practices"—quality control—for supplement makers in the United States. But the standards are not as strong as they are for conventional drugs. And the government doesn't have enough manpower to police every manufacturer. So for now I would first try to find a product with a "USP Verified" label from the U.S. Pharmacopeia, or specific products that have been studied in clinical trials. Otherwise, go with a manufacturer or brand you've heard of, such as a large store brand. Most of the serious quality issues are from products that have been bought online from companies you've probably never heard of.