

# 3. Medicines

## Prescription and non-prescription medicines

- your family doctor (GP) or specialist may prescribe medicine for you by giving you a prescription
- you will need to take the prescription to a chemist/pharmacy
- the pharmacist will dispense the medicine and explain how much you will pay for it, how to use the medicine and any side effects to watch out for
- you can buy some tablets, creams and liquid medicines without a prescription. There is no government subsidy for non-prescription medicines.

## Paying for prescription medicines

- when you take your prescription to the chemist/pharmacy, you should take your Medicare card, Health Care Card or Pension Concession Card with you as these may make the medicine cheaper
- the Federal Government's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) subsidises medicines listed under this scheme
- medicines must be prescribed by a doctor to make them eligible for PBS subsidy, but even then not all medicines are eligible. If your doctor prescribes a medicine that is not on the PBS list you will have to pay the full cost
- if you have a Health Care Card the maximum you will pay for each PBS medicine is \$4.90 (as at 1 January 2007)
- if you only have a Medicare card the maximum you will pay for each PBS medicine is \$30.70 (as at 1 January 2007)
- these maximum costs are adjusted on 1 January every year
- if you or your family need a lot of medicines in a year, ask your pharmacist about another scheme called the 'Safety Net' that can help you with the costs after you have spent a set amount. Your pharmacist can help you to apply for this scheme.

Your pharmacist may ask you if you want a cheaper generic brand medicine. Many medicines are available in more than one brand and the prices between brands may vary. Generic medicines contain identical amounts of the same active ingredients, in the same strength and in the same dosage form and have been tested to ensure that they have the same effect as the more expensive medicines.

## Taking medicines

- instructions will be written on a label affixed on the medicine. If you do not understand the instructions, ask your pharmacist to explain it to you verbally. Make sure that you<sup>1</sup>:
  - do not take medicine prescribed for someone else
  - do not use old or out of date medicine
  - keep medicines out of reach of children
  - go back to your doctor if there are any side effects
  - do not give medicine prescribed to you to someone else including overseas relatives
  - let your pharmacist or doctor know if you are having difficulty taking your medicines or forgetting to take your medicines
  - understand the storage requirements for your medicine
    - for example, some medicines may need to be kept refrigerated while others should not be stored in the refrigerator
  - check with your pharmacist or doctor before taking or using any new medicines to ensure that these do not interact with your current medicines.

## Medicine may not always be prescribed

- you may have noticed that doctors in Australia prescribe medicines differently than in your home country. You may have found that doctors in Australia may be more or less reluctant to prescribe medicines, or seem to use injections differently
- many doctors in the Australian health care system recognise that having worries can cause physical health problems. Your doctor may prefer you to talk about your problems, or learn relaxation exercises, rather than prescribing medicine
- when the doctor believes your lifestyle can prevent you from developing a health condition or making one worse, a change of lifestyle may be recommended such as more exercise, healthy eating or recreational activities. This may seem strange; however, this advice is all based on good health research
- you may also be taking traditional remedies or medicines that you have purchased without a prescription for your health problems. It is a good idea to tell your doctor that you are using these, even though the doctor may not be very familiar with them. This is because prescribed medicines and traditional remedies may interact with one another and cause complications.

1. Adapted from Australia. The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. [online] Aug 2001. [cited 26 April 2007] Available from: [www.survivorsvc.org.au/pdfdocs/Healthy%20start/EnglishVersion.pdf](http://www.survivorsvc.org.au/pdfdocs/Healthy%20start/EnglishVersion.pdf)

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### Getting more information about medicines

- you can get information about common side effects, drug interactions, warnings and general information about prescription, non-prescription and complementary (herbal/'natural'/vitamin/mineral) medicines by ringing the National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Line on **1300 888 763** between 9am – 6pm, Monday to Friday. Please note that telephone interpreters are not available through this telephone line
- information translated into 16 languages about Medicare, PBS medicines and taking medicines safely can be found at [www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/yourhealth/our\\_services/](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/yourhealth/our_services/)

This factsheet is part of a series of 10. The complete set comprises:

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