

# MAIL TODAY

## POPPING A PILL WITH COFFEE

By RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

Medication mistakes can be hazardous so avoid making them by following some simple do's and don'ts

**M**OST OF us have become pill poppers. We imagine ourselves to be experts on the right medicine to be taken for a cold, fever or allergy. The doctor, according to us, is meant to be consulted only in an emergency.

But this mistaken notion can be hazardous to the health. Every year 1.6 million people worldwide are sickened or severely injured by medication mistakes. These could be prevented, if only we followed the guidance of a qualified medical practitioner. Here are some common yet avoidable medication mistakes:

### 1. Combining similar pills

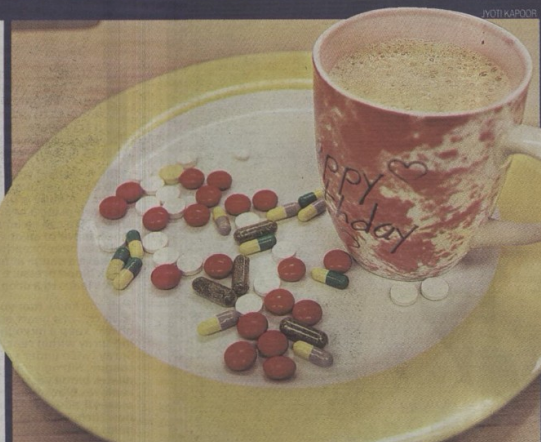
IT IS ALL too easy to end up with several medications that have similar actions, although they were prescribed to treat different conditions. One medication may be recommended to treat pain, another prescribed for anxiety and yet another to help you sleep. But the fact is that all these are sedatives, and the combined effect is toxic. "The risk for this overdose is highest with drugs that function by depressing the central nervous system, which include painkillers such as Brufen, anti allergy drugs like cetirizine and sedatives such as Valium. They all have sedative effects and can depress the central nervous system to such an extent that the person might not be able to move," says Dr Romil Tickoo, consultant internal medicine, Max Healthcare.

Over sedation frequently happens with seemingly innocuous over-the-counter (OTC) drugs like antihistamines, cough and cold medicines like Benadryl and Korex, and OTC sleeping pills. This kind of drug mixing is responsible for many medication-induced health problems and even death.

**HOW TO AVOID IT:** Pay attention to the warnings on the packaging of OTC pills and the risks listed. "Key words are sleepy, drowsy, dizzy, sedation and their equivalent. If more than one of your prescription or OTC medication warns against taking it while driving or warns that it can make you drowsy, beware," says Dr Tickoo. This means that the drug has a sedative effect and should not be combined with other drugs with the same effect or even alcohol.

### 2. The wrong dosage

IT IS a standard joke that most doctors have terrible handwriting. Jokes apart, scribbled prescriptions may confuse and even mislead a patient or chemist. Drugs are prescribed in a variety of units of measure, usually noted using abbreviations or symbols and offering a host of opportunities for disaster. All it takes is a misplaced decimal point and 1.0 mg becomes 10 mg, a tenfold dosing error that could cause a fatal overdose. "Some of the most extreme dosage mistakes occur when someone mistakes a dose in milligrams with one in micrograms resulting in a dose 1000 times higher," says Dr KM



## Why this and some other common pill-popping habits are a mistake

Singh, senior consultant internal medicine, Fortis La Femme. Dr Tickoo says insulin, the primary medication used by diabetics, can cause one of the worst medication errors because it is measured in units, abbreviated with a U, which can look like a zero or a 4 or any number of other things when scribbled. Another common mistake is getting the frequency wrong. A drug that is supposed to be given once a day is given four times a day. "Doctors write abbreviations like 'bd' and 'bid' 'qd' 'od' etc to denote the frequency of the medications which can be confusing even for the chemists who are not well versed in these matters. They end up giving their own advice to the patient," says Dr Singh.

**HOW TO AVOID IT:** Make sure your doctor's writing is clear on the original prescription and cross-check the details with him. If you cannot read the dosage prop-

erly, chances are the chemist will have the same problem. Ask the doctor to write full forms instead of abbreviations and make sure all your questions are answered before you leave the clinic.

### 3. Drinking with pills

PLENTY of drugs are dangerous if combined with liquor. Those who enjoy their drink can be careless about avoiding the bottle while on medication, despite knowing the risk. "Alcohol, when combined with a long list of painkillers, sedatives and medications can become a deadly poison," says Dr SP Byotra, senior consultant internal medicine, Sir Gangaram Hospital. Many experts opine that if you are on ANY kind of medication you should ask your doctor before drinking. All too common are combinations with common medicines for cough

and cold, sedatives and anti depressants. Certain cough and cold medications themselves contain alcohol and one can end up with alcohol poisoning. "Alcohol combined with antidepressants can cause a dangerous rise in blood pressure and when combined with sedatives such as valium, can depress the heart rate enough to induce a coma. Also drinking if you are on statins — which reduce cholesterol levels in blood — can cause serious damage to the liver," says Dr Tickoo. Diabetics are also more susceptible to experiencing a drop in blood sugar levels if they drink, as alcohol lowers blood sugar levels dramatically.

**HOW TO AVOID IT:** When you get a new prescription, do ask your doctor if it is safe to drink while on medication. If the cautions against this, and you are a heavy drinker and know you are likely to drink while taking the medication, do not hesitate to request him to prescribe an alternative which is safer. Also, read the handouts of OTC medications carefully and see if alcohol is mentioned as a risk and whether the medicine itself contains alcohol.

### 4. Mixing many pills

IN OUR bid to self medicate we don't realise that many OTC drugs can cause serious health problems when taken together. "Medication of the ofloxacin group such as Norflox to treat digestive disorders can react, dangerously with anti clotting drugs,

drugs for hypoglycaemia and anti-inflammatories like Brufen," says Dr Tickoo. Others who need to be careful while taking medicines of the ofloxacin group include those with a history of epilepsy and also people taking medication for hypoglycaemia. In the latter case, they may cause a dangerous drop of blood sugar levels. Aspirin — a blood thinner — is also another medicine to watch out for. "If one stops taking aspirin a week or so before a surgical procedure, the result can be life threatening bleeding. Diabetics who take aspirin should also beware as it can react with their medication and reduce the blood sugar levels even more," says Dr Singh. Certain painkillers like Brufen reduces the effect of beta blockers — medication for reduction of blood pressure — and can also cause a rise in blood pressure. Calcium also should not be taken with iron as it reduces the absorption of the latter. There have been cases of people taking calcium supplements who develop anaemia and iron deficiencies. "Those who keep popping antacids and calcium supplements can suffer from milk-alkali syndrome, which causes hypercalcemia, disorientation and breathlessness," says Dr Tickoo.

**HOW TO AVOID IT:** When your doctor is writing out a new prescription, mention or remind him of any OTC medication you might be taking.

### 5. With food or not?

A VERY common mistake people make with medication is to take it along with food, not realising that this has a significant effect on its efficacy.

Certain medications should be taken on an empty stomach because food reduces their absorption significantly. Drugs for thyroid disorders and osteoporosis fall in this category," says Dr Tickoo. Coffee inhibits the absorption of iron significantly and taking iron supplements at breakfast with a cup of mocha renders them ineffective. "Cheese contains tyramine which when combined with certain group of antidepressants called MAO inhibitors, causes a spike in blood pressure that can be dangerous," says Dr Tickoo. Young children who are given antibiotic tetracycline should avoid milk while on the meds as it hampers their absorption. Those on the blood thinner warfarin should be careful to avoid food containing Vitamin K, like broccoli, liver and spinach, as these reduce the absorption of the drug and increases the body's requirement of this medicine to an unhealthy degree. Warfarin is the king where drug interactions are concerned. You need just the right amount of this medicine in your system for it to be effective as too much or too little can lead to serious heart problems such as arrhythmias or a stroke. Antibiotics such as ciprofloxacin and erythromycin can cause fluctuations in the levels of warfarin which can have serious effect on the heart," says Dr Singh.

**HOW TO AVOID IT:** Always talk to your doctor about whether you should have the medications prescribed with or without food and if food reactions are likely.

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## DID YOU KNOW

**CHAMPAGNE CUTS BAD CHOLESTEROL**  
A glass of champagne may be as beneficial as red wine at lowering the risk of heart disease. Like red wine, champagne contains phenols — compounds which work as antioxidants. It is believed that phenols help keep arteries clear of fatty deposits caused by high levels of LDL — or bad cholesterol. This lowers the risk of atherosclerosis, a condition in which the arteries harden and become narrower, restricting the supply of blood. This condition is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

