

WEST AFRICAN RESCUE ASSOCIATION

THE DANGERS OF SELF MEDICATION



It is very common in developing countries for people to developed distrust in going to doctors for treatment. This is not surprising considering the vast array of treatment which can be found at local facilities. It can vary from excellent to absolutely appalling. Educated people can easily fall into a bad habit in Africa of self prescribing and self treating; this is exacerbated by the ease at which they can get hold of prescription medications over the counter at the pharmacy without a prescription. This is an extremely dangerous practice.

WARA would like to warn individuals of the dangers of such irresponsible practices.

- Prescription drugs are under prescription for good reason. Usually because they are designed to treat specific conditions and are powerful, dosage specific and come along with extremely dangerous side effects.
- Unlike other countries where strict regulations and conscious adherence to appropriate drug regulations which protect the general public, many drug stores in Ghana will allow you to purchase anything you want over the counter without a prescription. This makes for a highly irregular and dangerous system in place.
- Medical Doctors study for approximately 7 – 8 years to acquire the necessary skills required for safe medical practice of diagnosis and appropriate treatment. Some lay people often have a dangerous misconception that they can diagnose themselves – they do not consider the potentially lethal consequences of a misdiagnoses compounded by mistreatment with inappropriate medications.
- All medications affect the kidneys and liver in harmful ways and can place extra strain on the body on top of an already compromised state due to an illness – this compounds medications being used only when necessary and only for specific diagnosed treatment purposes.

THE ROLE OF THE PHARMACY

Many medications need to be purchased and kept under specific environmental conditions. Pharmacies in Africa face the additional challenges of inconsistent power supply, extreme temperatures, humidity and long distance supply chains all of which can jeopardize the cold chain rendering it inadequate. Be sure that the pharmacy you purchase medications from has adequate supply chains themselves. Those that don't adhere with a high enough standard to the specific needs of drug cold chains compromise drug safety in a big way. In addition there is a very wide range of black market drugs available with reduced prices making it impossible for you to be reassured that what you are in fact buying is indeed what you think you are buying and if it is adequately safe enough to consume.

GUIDELINES FOR TREATMENT OF ILLNESSES AND MEDICATION USE IN AFRICA

- Only buy medications from a reputable pharmacy that you have been recommended to go to by a reputable health care service provider.
- Only take prescription medications if they have been prescribed to you by a reputable and registered medical doctor.
- Make sure you are familiar with all the side effects of the medications you have been prescribed.
- Make sure you understand how to take the medications prescribed and that the dosage is clear.
- Make sure that the doctor prescribing your medication to you is aware of any pre-conditions/ chronic health conditions/allergies that you have that may either be contra-indicated for that medicine or may cause a negative effect on you that needs to be well managed by your doctor.
- Make sure the doctor prescribing your medication is fully aware of any other medications that you are on as some combinations of drugs can cause dangerous toxicity and counter active reactions.
- If you have side effects/ negative reactions be in touch with your doctor immediately.
- Even if you have been prescribed something double check you have been given the correct medicine/ the correct dosage and that it is purchased in a well sealed box or package.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ANTIBIOTICS

- Never self prescribe antibiotics they are age, dose and diagnosis specific and incorrect treatment will only result in prolonging your illness and recovery process.
- Always finish the course of antibiotics that you have been prescribed – not doing so will increase drug resistance.
- One can commonly wait for up to three days after starting an antibiotic treatment for any major improvement to be felt.
- Mostly commonly antibiotic treatment is a minimum of five days but some antibiotics are only three day courses but the medication stays in your system for longer.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR MALARIA TREATMENT MEDICATION

- It is always better to see a doctor to have malaria treatment managed by a reputable health care professional.
- It is always preferable to diagnose malaria with a full blood count.
- Treatment for malaria can vary depending on a doctors opinion and on the severity.
- Always finish a course of malaria treatment even if you are feeling better soon after starting treatment. Finishing the course will ensure that any residual malaria parasites which may be left in your system are eradicated reducing the risk of a potential relapse.
- Malaria is a dangerous disease causing millions of fatalities every year in Africa. It also however is not the easiest disease to diagnose and can show a similar presentation to many other tropical diseases – one should not always assume it is malaria and treat before a doctors have properly assessed you.

GENRAL GUIDELINES FOR MALARIA PROPHYLACTICS

- Malaria prophylactics do not 100% prevent you from getting malaria
- Malaria prophylactics are not designed for long term use
- Many prophylactics can cause serious side effects which should be reported to a doctor immediately
- Not everyone can take malaria prophylactics – there are some contraindications please check carefully with a doctor if you should be taking them

HERBAL MEDICINE AND REMEDIES

Africa is renowned for liberal use of herbal remedies and medications – please note that many of these “medicines” can be extremely powerful and dangerous and all are unlicensed. Reactions can be very intense and can even worsen certain illnesses or ailments. Be warned that herbal medicines are not usually recommended by well qualified physicians for a good reason.

NEGATIVE REACTIONS TO DRUGS AND MEDICATIONS

More Caution should be taken for medications with: children, elderly, those taking other drugs and those with any congenital abnormalities and the very sick and those breastfeeding.

Drug side effects can largely be divided into three main areas:

- **Skin reactions:** rashes, itching, blotches.
- **Gastro intestinal reactions:** diarrhea, vomiting, stomach pain.
- **Reactions affecting the whole body:** from mild such as drop in blood pressure and in the worst case scenario an anaphylactic reaction which is potentially life threatening.

Mild reactions can progress rapidly and easily into anaphylaxis but signs of the following should always be taken very seriously and medical help sought immediately:

- Shortness of breath or changes or difficulty in breathing or swallowing
- Swelling in any way – commonly the mouth, eyes, and face and throat
- Large portions of the body being itchy or red or swollen
- Vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pains
- Dizziness – feeling of fainting

If you are a WARA member call the hotline immediately for direct medical advice from a doctor should you develop any side effects from your medication.

When taking any kinds of medicine remember: there are specific instructions/warnings that come on the packet inserts for GOOD reasons which should be taken seriously:

- Some medicine can cause enhanced negative reactions if mixed with alcohol, drugs or other medications such as aspirin for example.
- Some medications cause drowsiness and therefore restrictions such as driving /handling heavy machinery for example. Side effects like drowsiness can increase due to the consumption of alcohol.
- Some medicines need to be taken on an empty stomach to maximize absorption; others can be corrosive on an empty stomach and require being taken after meals. These warnings are for good reason and should be taken seriously.
- Some medications make one more vulnerable to sunlight – avoid the sun, should this be instructed.
- Follow instructions carefully regarding the method of taking the medication as it is for a purpose: some are to be dissolved under the tongue, some swallowed whole.
- Remember to keep your medications in the appropriate way so that they do not become damaged as they would be rendered useless. Some require being kept in cool places and others in the refrigerator. In this environment leaving medications in the car in such heat can quickly destroy the chemical components in medications.
- It is good practice to flush expired medications down the toilet so that they do not end up being consumed by someone else.

REMEMBER TO KEEP ALL MEDICATIONS AT ALL TIMES SAFELY AWAY FROM THE REACH OF SMALL CHILDREN.