

# COMPASS

## Window to Well-being

Pharmacists can help you be **healthy, wealthy and wise**

by nancy nichols

Connie McKellep of Waverly vividly recalls the emotional roller coaster of caring for an extremely colicky infant. When her son, Austin, was just 2 months old, “He would cry without stop from 5 p.m. to midnight every day,” McKellep says. “My husband and I were new to parenting and didn’t know what to do — we were at wit’s end.”

That all changed after McKellep, who works at the Stylist salon next to a Walgreens in Fort Collins, mentioned her predicament to the pharmacist there.

“The pharmacist told me, ‘If it were my baby, I would recommend this,’” showing her a medication for colic, McKellep says.

After consulting with her physician and receiving a prescription, life got back to normal. The colic disappeared, the baby was happy and healthy, and the new parents breathed a big sigh of relief.

Pharmacists dispense this kind of practical advice every day to make their customers’ lives easier. But pharmacists are also one of the best resources for such weighty issues as drug safety and how to save money on medicine.

Community pharmacists at local drug-stores, whether independent or chain pharmacies, are specially trained (and required by law) to respond to customers’ questions about both over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications.

“Pharmacists are generally a lot more accessible than physicians,” says



Cherri Ramirez, a pharmacist at the Kmart store at College and Drake in Fort Collins.

Ramirez, who earned her pharmacy degree in 1988 at the University of Wyoming, chose to practice in a retail setting rather than a hospital because of the sense of community she has with her customers. She’s been working with some of them for nearly two decades.

“It’s kind of a small-town feeling at our store,” says Ramirez, who’s no stranger to small towns. (She grew up in Fleming, Colo. — population 435.) “I’m able to get to know my customers over time and help them more effectively.”

One of the top issues for pharmacists these days is helping ensure proper use of medications and prevent adverse interactions among multiple medications. Many drugs, whether prescription or OTC, can do more harm than good if

*Two out of every three patients who visit a doctor leave with at least one prescription, and nearly 40 percent of Americans (including many elderly) use four or more medications, according to the FDA.*

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taken incorrectly or in combination with incompatible or duplicate medications. Consequences of adverse interactions can include anything from serious health risk (including death) to lowered effectiveness through delayed, decreased or enhanced absorption of a medication. The risk of adverse interactions increases dramatically for the 40 percent of Americans using four or more prescription medications.

“It can be a big problem if you go to more than one physician, and they are not aware of what your other doctors have prescribed for you,” says Cheri Nichols, a registered nurse at the Health District of Northern Larimer County. “Your pharmacist is a great resource to look at your list of medications and let you know if they will work effectively together. Or it could be your primary-care physician — just make sure at least one person with medication expertise sees your full list of medications,” she says.

Nichols suggests that you write a complete list of your medications and bring it to medical appointments and trips to the pharmacy. You’ll also

want to note any dietary supplements you take (vitamins, minerals, botanicals, herbals) as they too can interact with medications.

“Fortunately the technology has kept up with Americans’ use of medications,” making it a snap for pharmacists to look up potential interactions on the computer, Ramirez says.

When an issue does arise, “We can contact the doctor and say, ‘This is what’s come up — what do you want us to do?’ We’re on the phone all the time with patients’ doctors,” Ramirez says.

“People have to be their own best advocate — they are ultimately responsible for their own healthcare,” Ramirez adds. This means patients need to be well informed about their health status and proactively discuss the treatments and medications prescribed for them with all members of their healthcare team (physician, pharmacist, specialists).

Like other members of your healthcare team, your pharmacist is legally bound to keep your information confidential. So feel free to ask any and all relevant questions.

If you’re unsure what your doctor or pharmacist is telling you about your medications, consider bringing a family member or friend to your doctor’s appointment or pharmacy. It’s critical to understand what health conditions your prescriptions are supposed to treat and how to take the medications properly. (See “Tips to Avoid Problems.”)

## Saving money on medications

▶ An easy-to-understand guide to saving money on prescriptions can be found online at [tinyurl.com/5qobsz](http://tinyurl.com/5qobsz). Produced by the Consumers Union and Consumer Reports, this eight-page fact sheet, “Getting the Best Price,” covers topics such as generic and non-name-brand drugs. It addresses the needs of people in different age groups and with different types of insurance (or uninsured).

▶ The Health District offers a Prescription Assistance program for people who can’t afford their prescriptions. Prescription Assistance is open to qualifying residents of Fort Collins and northern Larimer County. People who live in the rest of Larimer County may use the program if they have a physician within Poudre Valley Health System. For information, call the Prescription Assistance office at 416-6519 or go online to [www.healthdistrict.org/rxhelp](http://www.healthdistrict.org/rxhelp).

▶ Free discount drug cards for Larimer County residents are available from the Health District, doctors’ offices, or human services agencies. Or download from the web: [www.larimermedicalsociety.org](http://www.larimermedicalsociety.org).



### INFORMATION CENTRAL

Pharmacist Cheri Ramirez welcomes questions from customers at the Fort Collins pharmacy where she’s worked for most of her 20-year career.

Besides providing advice on how to stay safe, pharmacists can keep money in your wallet by suggesting which medication option is least expensive. Many brand-name drugs have equally effective, lower-priced generic or store-brand equivalents. And many chain pharmacies are now offering special discount programs for their customers. (See “Saving Money on Medications” for more cost-cutting tips.)

Getting to know your pharmacist can be a prescription for better health. So next time you’re at the drugstore, walk up to the pharmacy and ask for assistance. It’s a window of knowledge worth exploring. ✨

## More help online

- ▶ Drug interaction look-up tools  
You can look up drug-interaction information on the FDA web site “Consumer Education: Ensuring Safe Use of Medicine” at [tinyurl.com/owegg6](http://tinyurl.com/owegg6). Some chain pharmacies also offer online look-up tools.
- ▶ How to talk to your pharmacist  
This FDA consumer web site, “Stop — Learn — Go,” will help you break the ice with your pharmacist: [tinyurl.com/px5ajh](http://tinyurl.com/px5ajh).
- ▶ Get the most from your pharmacist  
The American Pharmacists Association has a consumer web site packed with great resources, including “How to Get the Most from Your Pharmacist,” at [www.pharmacyandyou.org](http://www.pharmacyandyou.org).

## Tips to avoid problems

There are lots of things you can do to take prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications in a safe and responsible manner.

- ▶ Always read drug labels carefully. Ask when you don’t understand.
- ▶ Learn about the warnings for all the drugs you take.
- ▶ Keep medications in their original containers so that you can easily identify them (except when using a weekly pillbox for more complicated drug regimens).
- ▶ Ask your doctor what you need to avoid when you are prescribed a new medication. Ask about food, beverages, dietary supplements and other drugs.
- ▶ Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking an OTC drug if you are taking any prescription medications.
- ▶ Use one pharmacy for all of your drug needs.
- ▶ Keep all of your healthcare professionals informed about everything that you take.
- ▶ Keep a record of all prescription drugs, OTC drugs, and dietary supplements (including herbs) that you take. Try to keep this list with you at all times, but especially when you go to any medical appointment. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has a web site where you can get more information and download a sample medicine record: [www.fda.gov/forconsumers](http://www.fda.gov/forconsumers).

Source:  
FDA Consumer Health Information, [www.fda.gov/forconsumers](http://www.fda.gov/forconsumers)