

Problem Prescriptions

Three and a half million serious prescription drugs errors occur each year. Here we explore the four main causes and what you can do to protect yourself.

The Problem	How Common Is It?	What Can You Do?
Counterfeit Drugs	According to the FDA, about 1% of drugs sold in the U.S. may be counterfeit, and estimates range as high as 7%. There are about 5,000 drug products in a pharmacy, so that percentage could amount to about 50 counterfeits.	Stay alert for any changes in the look, size, taste, feel or smell of the prescription drugs you regularly take. Call your doctor if your drug doesn't seem to be working and to report any new or unusual side effects. Beware of online and overseas sellers; stick with sites accredited by the National Association of Board of Pharmacy. <i>Consumers discovered a counterfeit statin (statins are a class of drugs that lower cholesterol levels) because it tasted too bitter, and tainted heparin (is used as an injectable anticoagulant) because the injections stung more than usual.</i>
The Wrong Drug	25% of drug errors are due to mix-ups over sound-alike or look-alike drug names. 3,3170 pairs of drugs have similar names.	Ask your doctor to say the name of the drug and its purpose, and to write it down separate from your prescription. At the pharmacy, review the drug with your pharmacist when the prescription is filled. Be sure your name is on the prescription and that it matches what the doctor prescribed. For extra protection, be sure what is in the bottle is intended for your medical condition.
The Wrong Dose	Statistics on dosage mistakes are elusive, however one study at a busy Boston hospital revealed that nearly 4% of prescriptions filled had dosage errors. In an Arizona study, of the electronic prescriptions filled, 18% of errors were in dosage.	Review the dose and the strength of your prescription with your doctor as well as how often and how much you should be taking. Have your doctor write down the prescription separately and recheck the information with your pharmacist when you pick up your prescription.
Dangerous Interactions	In a study of 2.8 million people, researchers found potentially dangerous drug interactions in 2% of prescriptions. The risk increases after age 44 because your body is less able to metabolize medications. The odds that you'll have an interaction are 13% with 2 drugs, 38% with 5 drugs, and 82% with 7 drugs. Herbs, vitamins, and over-the-counter remedies can also cause interactions.	Carry a list of all prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, vitamins and supplements you are taking and show it to your doctor and your pharmacist. Your doctor may not know about everything you are taking, especially if you have more than one doctor or have your prescriptions filled at more than one pharmacy.