

Should you just say no to drugs?

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When your doctor suggests taking medicine for a problem, do you think first of the side effects that drug may cause. While that may be a valid concern, the real question is more complex. The next time you consider taking ANY medicine, vitamin or supplement, consider the following questions.

What outcome do you want? What is this medicine supposed to do? Is it intended to treat an ongoing problem or prevent one in the future? If you have pneumonia you want the antibiotic to eliminate the bacteria. If you are in pain you may want the medicine to relieve it. What about preventing problems? If you wish to avoid a future stroke or heart attack you may want to lower your blood pressure or cholesterol.

How important is this outcome to you? If you have cancer, curing it is literally a life and death situation. If you are having a panic attack, getting rid of the anxiety may be very important and feel like a life or death issue. If you have high blood pressure, however, and there are no symptoms, how important is it to avoid an event in the future? Studies have shown that people tend to weight the chances of current side effects higher than the chances of future good effects.

How likely is this medicine to work? What is the evidence? For prescription medicines there is published research that shows how well they work. For other substances, you may have direct experience that they work; i.e., you don't need a study to know that prunes relieve constipation. What about other things where the research or your personal experience is lacking? Do you rely on the advice of friends who have taken it? Do you believe the advertisements? Do you take it on faith without any evidence?

What are the side effects? In the PDR (Physicians Desk Reference) the side effects of each prescription medicine are listed. To be licensed, the law requires reporting all events that occur in patients while taking that medicine, whether they are believed to be related to the medicine or not. Unlicensed medicines (herbs, supplements, etc.) do not have to report side effects so you may not know about them.

How dangerous are the side effects? They may range from very serious problems like kidney or liver failure to less important ones like mild headaches or rashes. Are they permanent or will they go away when the drug wears off? Many side effects like nausea disappear in a few hours so the problem is limited. Other side effects may not go away when the drug is stopped and can create a new problem.

How likely are the side effects? Some side effects, like low blood counts with chemotherapy, are very common and are expected. Other side effects are rare, occurring in less than one person in a thousand. Rare events may be important but the chances of them affecting you are remote.

If you have a side effect (or good effect), how do you know it is due to the medicine? Most studies show that placebos have a 20 to 40% response rate regardless of drug or disease. Most studies show that placebos have the same incidence of side effects, too: about 20 to 40%. Sometimes it is the circumstances under which the medicine is taken that determine the side effects and good effects, not the drug.

No medicine should be taken or rejected thoughtlessly. There should be a reason to take it and an honest evaluation of the risks. Many patients feel out of control already because of their disease or life circumstances. Adding one more risk, however slight, may feel like the last straw on the camel's back. There may be other issues complicating the decision such as a sense your doctor has not really understood your concerns, insufficient understanding of your illness or even an underlying mistrust of the medical system.

As in all decisions, you should weigh the balance between the possible benefits and the potential hazards. Recognizing there is no guarantee of either good or bad result, make the best choice you can.