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Study: Medication errors harm 1.5M a year

Treatment of such injuries costs \$3.5 billion annually

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USA TODAY

Medication errors are among the most common medical errors, harming at least 1.5 million people every year. The problem is so serious that, on average, a hospital patient is subject to at least one medication error per day.

These are among the findings in a report released Thursday by the Institute of Medicine, chartered by Congress to advise the government on science and medical issues.

The extra costs of treating medication-related injuries occurring in hospitals alone conservatively amount to \$3.5 billion a year, the report states. The IOM panel estimates that at least a quarter of these injuries are preventable.

"The good news is that many of these errors are preventable, and preventing them will save money in the long run," says J. Lyle Bootman, co-chairman of the IOM panel that crafted the report

Tips to avoid problems with medication

The report from the Institute of Medicine recommends these steps that hospital patients can take to reduce their risk of being the victims of a medication error:

- ▶ Ask the doctor or nurse what drugs you are being given.

- ▶ Do not take a drug without being told the purpose for doing so.

- ▶ Exercise your right to have a friend or relative present whenever you receive medication and are un-

able to monitor the process yourself.

- ▶ Before surgery, ask whether there are medications, especially prescription antibiotics, that you should take or any that you should stop taking preoperatively.

- ▶ Before discharge, ask for a list of the medications that you should be taking at home, have a doctor or nurse review them with you, and be sure that you understand how these medications should be taken.

and dean of the College of Pharmacy at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

The report recommends that all health care providers and pharmacies be using electronic prescribing systems by 2010.

Because the similarity of drug names causes up to a quarter of all medication errors, the IOM committee called for the standardization of drug-naming terms. The pharmaceutical industry should develop a plan to deal with drug naming, labeling and packaging problems by the end of next year, the report states.

The panel called use of medications

"ubiquitous," noting that in any given week, more than four of five U.S. adults take at least one medication and almost a third take at least five different drugs.

For patients, it is key to be an active participant in your own care, says Albert Wu, a panel member and professor of health policy and management at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

"If (your medication) comes in a different color or different shape, don't just assume that they sent you the right pill — call and ask," Bootman says. If a doctor isn't available, ask the pharmacist who issued the drug, he says. Other IOM

recommendations for patients include:

- ▶ Read, understand and follow the instructions for each drug you take. More than 50% of patients don't take their medications exactly as prescribed, the report states.

- ▶ Keep a list of all medications and all non-prescription drugs taken, as well as all vitamins and herbal remedies. Review the list with your health care provider at every visit to make sure there aren't dangerous drug interactions.

Other IOM recommendations for the pharmaceutical industry:

- ▶ The Food and Drug Administration should help standardize the text and design of medication leaflets so consumers can easily understand them.

- ▶ The National Library of Medicine should create a website that is a comprehensive, understandable source of information about drugs and fund a national telephone line for people who don't have Internet access.

- ▶ Health care organizations should tell patients about medication errors made in their care, whether they were hurt by the error or not.

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