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Monitor Reactions to Unfamiliar Medications

People have a wide range of responses to remedies, both herbal and pharmaceutical, and there is an emerging field of research that focuses on this subject. "Pharmacogenomics is basically the study of how drug responses vary from one patient to the next," Hulisz says. "It turns out that people have genetic variations in how they metabolize medications. One person might metabolize a certain medication very slowly, whereas another individual, who doesn't have a defect in that enzyme system, would metabolize it at a normal rate. In the first situation, that person could experience major side effects."

Because there is so much variation in responses, it makes sense for all of us to monitor and be aware of our reactions when taking unfamiliar remedies. "When you are taking a new medication, consult both your pharmacist and your doctor," Hulisz says. "Patients really should slow their doctors down enough so that they answer questions such as, what effects should I expect with this medication?"

If we forget to ask, or the doctor didn't really address the question, we can always check with the local pharmacist. "We train our pharmacy students to be actively engaged in patient encounters and also available to advise physicians about medications," Hulisz says. "Pharmacists have a great deal of information, especially currently trained pharmacists with doctoral-level degrees, who have six to eight years of training. Many times they have more detailed information about medications and supplements than the physicians do. The pharmacist will be able to give you an informed opinion about the likelihood of a particular symptom being associated with a drug as a side effect."

Local pharmacists will print out detailed information at the drug store, or a fact sheet will be included with a mail order prescription. "But sometimes all that information is so overwhelming, you really could use a short conversation to boil it all down to the basic factors you need to be aware of," Hulisz says. "I'd suggest that before you put that tablet or capsule in your mouth, take a moment and read through the leaflets. If you still have a question, then call the pharmacist and chat with them to clarify the usual range of side effects, and also what signs or symptoms would be a matter for concern."

Elaine Zablocki has been a freelance health-care journalist for more than 20 years. She was the editor of *Alternative Medicine Business News* and *CHRF News Files*. She writes regularly for many health-care publications.

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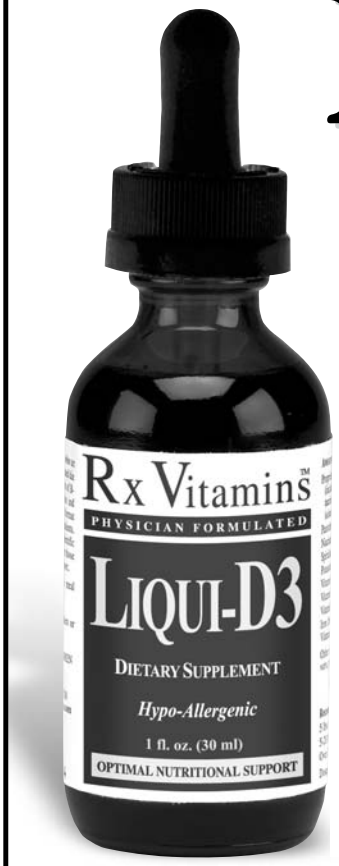

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