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Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Medication Safety Handbook



JUST ASK!
OWN YOUR HEALTH
KNOW YOUR MEDICINES
BEFRIEND YOUR PHARMACIST



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Further information contact:

Dr Hanan Khalil hanan.khalil@monash.edu

Introduction

Aboriginal health staff, while valuable members of their Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS), hospitals, allied health agencies, and other health services, it is largely overlooked that they are also First Australians and active members within their communities. When discussing medication, including the effects and side effects and all other associated matters with an Aboriginal person and/or their carer, the Aboriginal health worker will use a 'universally understandable' language and be mindful of any issues of cultural sensitivities (gender and age appropriateness for example), which surround this topic. As in the wider community, many First Australian men are very reluctant to seek medical advice and even when they do, often will not report pain as this is seen as a sign of weakness and/or 'Shame'. Also, First Australian women share a global gender preference for a female health and allied health professional. All Aboriginal health workers remain aware of literacy problems experienced by many First Australians and that written instructions may be yet another barrier to medication safety. Hearing loss is also another common reason why a First Australian patients experience difficulties in following verbal medical instructions and/or advice.

Aboriginal Health

As defined in NACCHO's Constitution as amended 9 March 2006, also from the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) 1989:

"Aboriginal health means not just the physical well-being of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total well-being of their Community. It is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life."

Indigenous concept of health and healing

Health is defined in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Constitution as a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. This definition extends beyond the traditional Western biomedical paradigm which treats body, mind and society as separate entities and reflects a more holistic understanding of health. Indigenous peoples have a similar understanding of health, as well-being is about the harmony that exists between individuals, communities and the universe.

Causes of side effects from medicines

Some of the common causes of side effects from medicines include:

- ✦ Failing to take the dose correctly – for example, at the right time of day or with food or drinks.

Overdosing:

- ✦ Allergies to chemical components of the medicine.
- ✦ Combining the medicine with alcohol or certain foods – for example, some older types of antidepressants can cause life-threatening side effects when combined with cheeses and a range of other foods (and alcoholic drinks).
- ✦ Taking other medicines (including complementary or non-prescription medicines available for purchase over-the-counter), illicit drugs or other preparations that interact with the medicine.
- ✦ Taking medicines stored at home but no longer prescribed.
- ✦ Taking a medicine that was prescribed for someone else.



Some conditions make side effects from medicines more likely

Always be guided by your doctor. It may not be advisable to take certain medicines if you:

- ✦ Drink heavily.
- ✦ Are pregnant, breastfeeding or trying to conceive.
- ✦ Are very young or elderly.
- ✦ Are known to be allergic to particular medicines.
- ✦ Have a stomach condition.
- ✦ Have kidney, liver or cardiac (heart and blood vessel) disease.

Ask about your medicine:

Make sure your doctor, pharmacist and other health professionals know about every medicine you take, including non-prescription and complementary medicines such as vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements. Mixing medicines can cause side effects.

When your doctor prescribes a medicine, or if you are buying an over-the-counter preparation from your pharmacy, questions you should ask include:

- ✦ What is the appropriate dosage – how much should I take, how often should I take it, and at what times of day?
- ✦ Should I take the medicine on a full or empty stomach?
- ✦ Do I need to swallow the pills whole, or can they be crushed or chewed?
- ✦ What should I do if I miss a dose?
- ✦ For how long should I take the medication?
- ✦ Are there problems with taking the medicine if I have a particular condition/health problem?
- ✦ What are the possible side effects, such as drowsiness, and how can I manage these?
- ✦ What are the signs and symptoms of serious reactions that I need to watch out for?
- ✦ Are there potential problems in mixing this with other medicines I take or may take?
- ✦ Can I have a Consumer Medicine Information leaflet?

Mineral and Herbal supplements (Traditional Medicines/Complementary medicines):

- ✦ Tell your doctor and other health professionals about any supplements you are taking. Many herbal preparations are as powerful as pharmaceutical drugs and may cause side effects on their own, or if used in combination with other medicines or in certain conditions.
- ✦ Unlike pharmacy medication/prescription drugs, the strength of traditional herbal preparations may not be clear. Make sure you seek advice from a suitably qualified medical professional and/or your pharmacist.
- ✦ Don't self-diagnose (guess at the health problem), see a Doctor for diagnosis and treatment if you take or are thinking about taking traditional medicines or any complementary supplements.
- ✦ Use all traditional medicine/complementary medicines strictly as directed and/or according to your Doctor's recommendations.



Taking your medicines safely:

General suggestions on how to take your medicines safely include:

- ✦ If you are not certain that you can remember the dosage instructions, write them down, ask your pharmacist to write them down, or ask your doctor or pharmacist about a Dosette box (Blister Pack). This is particularly important if you are taking more than one medicine.
- ✦ If your prescription medicines are vital for your health and wellbeing, consider carrying a list of your medicines and their dosage instructions with you in case of an emergency or if you are admitted to hospital (you can get bracelets and medallions as well).
- ✦ Ask your doctor or pharmacist for a Consumer Medicine Information leaflet.
- ✦ Read the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet and all the labels on the container carefully before you use the medicine. They will tell you about your medicine and how to take it. Do this with every medicine (you can also ask your Aboriginal Health Worker or Hospital Liaison Officer if you're not sure about your medicines).
- ✦ Always take medicines in a well lit room. Wear your glasses if you need to. Follow the directions for use carefully and accurately.
- ✦ Regularly clear out your medicine cabinet and dispose of any medicine that is past its use-by date or that you no longer use. These medicines can be returned to your local Chemist/Pharmacy/Hospital for safe disposal.
- ✦ Remember, **do not give your medicine to anyone else** even if you think they have the same health problem as you did.

Storage of medicines:

- ✦ Keep your medicines in their original containers.
- ✦ Don't remove the labels from containers – they include expiry dates and important instructions on how to store your medicine.
- ✦ Store medicines out of direct sunlight in a cool, dry place.
- ✦ Some medicines need to be refrigerated – if you leave them out of the fridge by accident or they freeze, check with your pharmacist whether they should be thrown out or used within a certain time.

Protect your children:

Children see adults taking pills and, given the opportunity, may take those pills themselves. Safety suggestions include:

- ✦ Ask your pharmacist to package your medicines in childproof containers, if possible.
- ✦ Keep medicines locked in cupboards or concealed in the fridge out of children's sight and reach up high.
- ✦ Do not store medicines in the refrigerator unless advised to do so by your pharmacist.
- ✦ Only remove a medicine from its packaging when you are ready to take it – do not leave it lying around for a child to pick up and take.
- ✦ If you (or a visitor's) handbag contains medicines, make sure to keep the handbag out of children's reach.
- ✦ Try to avoid taking tablets in front of your children, as they may want to copy you.
- ✦ Keep medicines away from chemicals and household products and never store in recycled food or drink containers.



Where to get help:

- ✦ In an emergency, always call triple zero (000).
- ✦ Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – for poisoning, suspected poisoning and poisoning prevention advice and information (24 hours, 7 days).
- ✦ Adverse Medicines Events (AME) Line Tel. 1300 134 237 – to report a problem with your medicine (not for emergencies).
- ✦ Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines.
- ✦ Your doctor.
- ✦ Your pharmacist.
- ✦ Aboriginal Health Worker/Hospital Liaison Worker.

Things to remember

- ✦ Some of the causes of serious side effects include taking the medicines incorrectly, combining them with alcohol, or using medicines prescribed for someone else.
- ✦ Make sure your doctor and other health professionals know about every medicine you take, including prescription, non-prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and complementary medicines such as vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements.
- ✦ Keep all medicines out of children’s reach.
- ✦ Dispose of unwanted or out-of-date medicines by returning them to your local community pharmacy – never give any of your medicines to other people.

IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS:

- In an **Emergency**, always call triple zero (**000**)
- **Victorian Poisons Information Centre** Tel. **13 11 26** for poisoning, suspected poisoning and poisoning prevention advice and information (24 hours, 7 days).
- **Adverse Medicines Events** (AME) Line Tel. **1300 134 237** – to report a problem with your medicine (not for emergencies).
- **Medicines Line** (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (**1300 633 424**) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines.



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<http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au/publicationsandresources/pdf/publication-details/using-medicines-herbal-medicines-and-vitamin-preparations-wisely>.
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<http://www.austin.org.au/page/525>

On-Line Resources:

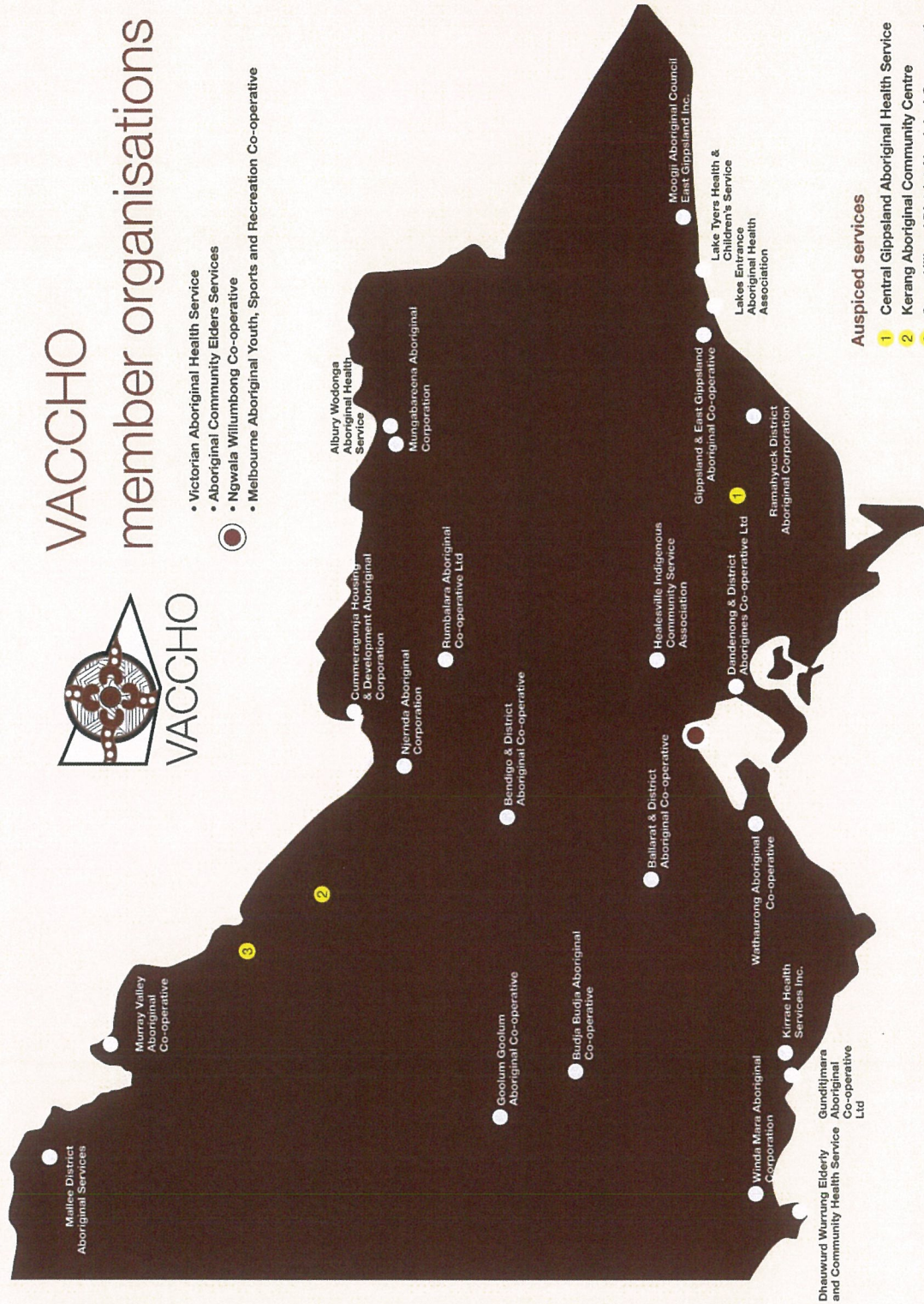
- *Ask about your medicine*. Available from:
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/medicines-safety-issues>
- *Breast feeding and prescription medications*. Available from:
<https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/drugs.html>
- *Child-resistant packaging doesn't mean child-proof*. Available from:
<http://www.nps.org.au/publications/consumer/medicinewise-living/2014/child-resistant-packaging-doesnt-mean-child-proof>
- *Complimentary [Traditional] Medicines*. Available from:
<http://www.nps.org.au/publications/consumer/medicinewise-living/2012/complementary-and-natural-medicines>
- *Dentists and medicines*. Available from:
<http://www.nps.org.au/publications/consumer/medicinewise-living/2014/dentists-and-medicines>
- *Medicines and merriment: how to prevent medicines interactions*. Available from:
<http://www.nps.org.au/publications/consumer/medicinewise-living/2013/medicines-and-merriment-how-to-prevent-interactions>
- *Men's health: is it time for your 100,000 km service?* Available from:
<http://www.nps.org.au/publications/consumer/medicinewise-living/2013/mens-health-is-it-time-for-your-100,000-km-service>
- *Why some people don't like using prescription medicines*. Available from:
<http://www.nps.org.au/publications/consumer/medicinewise-living/2013/why-we-dont-like-to-take-medicines>



VACCHO member organisations



- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
- Aboriginal Community Elders Services
- Ngwala Wilumbong Co-operative
- Melbourne Aboriginal Youth, Sports and Recreation Co-operative



Auspiced services

- 1 Central Gippsland Aboriginal Health Service
- 2 Kerang Aboriginal Community Centre
- 3 Swan Hill and District Aboriginal Co-operative