

Safe and Effective Use of Prescription Medications

General Considerations

- Use drugs cautiously and only when necessary because all drugs affect body functions and may cause adverse effects.
- Do not take drugs left over from a previous illness or prescribed for someone else and do not share prescription drugs with anyone else. The likelihood of having the right drug in the right dose is remote and the risk of adverse effects is high in such circumstances.
- Keep all health care providers informed about all the drugs being taken, including over-the-counter (OTC) products and herbal or dietary supplements. One way to do this is to keep a written record of all current medicines, including their names and doses and how they are taken. It is a good idea to carry a copy of this list at all times.
- Take drugs as prescribed and for the length of time prescribed; notify a health care provider if unable to obtain or take a medication. Therapeutic effects greatly depend on taking medications correctly. Altering the dose or time may cause underdosage or overdosage.
- Follow instructions for follow-up care (eg, office visits, laboratory or other diagnostic tests that monitor therapeutic or adverse effects of drugs). Some drugs require more frequent monitoring than others. However, safety requires periodic checks with essentially all medications.
- Take drugs in current use when seeing a physician for any health-related problem. It may be helpful to remind the physician periodically of the medications being taken and ask if any can be discontinued or reduced in dosage.
- Report any drug allergies to all health care providers.
- Ask questions regarding medications being prescribed by your healthcare provider. All concerns regarding the medication regimen should be communicated as well.
- Store medications out of reach of children and never refer to medications as “candy”, to prevent accidental ingestion.
- Develop a plan for renewing or refilling prescriptions so that the medication supply does not run out when the prescribing physician is unavailable or the pharmacy is closed.
- When taking prescription medications, talk to a doctor, pharmacist, or nurse before starting an OTC medication, or herbal or dietary supplement. This is a safety factor to avoid undesirable drug interactions.
- Inform health care providers if you have diabetes or kidney or liver disease. These conditions require special precautions with drug therapy.
- If pregnant, consult your obstetrician before taking any medications prescribed by another physician. If breast-feeding, consult your obstetrician or pediatrician, before taking any medications prescribed by another physician.

Self Administration

- Develop a routine for taking medications (eg, at the same time and place each day). A schedule that minimally disrupts usual household activities is more convenient and more likely to be followed accurately.
- Take medications in a well-lighted area and read labels of containers to ensure taking the intended drug. Do not take medications if you are not alert or cannot see clearly.

- Most tablets and capsules should be taken whole. If unable to take them whole, ask a health care provider before splitting, chewing, or crushing tablets or taking the medication out of capsules. Some long-acting preparations are dangerous if altered so that the entire dose is absorbed at the same time.
- As a general rule, take oral medications with 6-8 oz of water, in a sitting or standing position. The water helps tablets and capsules dissolve in the stomach, “dilutes” the drug so that it is less likely to upset the stomach, and promotes absorption of the drug into the bloodstream. The upright position helps the drug reach the stomach rather than getting stuck in the throat or esophagus.
- Take most oral drugs at evenly spaced intervals around the clock. For example, if ordered once daily, take about the same time every day. If ordered twice daily or morning and evening, take about 12 hours apart.
- Follow instructions about taking a medication with food or on an empty stomach, about taking with other medications, or taking with fluids other than water.
- If a dose is missed, most authorities recommend taking the dose if remembered soon after the scheduled time and omitting the dose if it is not remembered for several hours. If a dose is omitted, the next dose should be taken at the next scheduled time. Do not double the dose.
- If taking a liquid medication (or giving one to a child), measure with a calibrated medication cup or measuring spoon. A dose cannot be measured accurately with household teaspoons or tablespoons because they are different sizes and deliver varying amounts of medication.
- Use other types of medications according to instructions. If not clear how a medication is to be used, be sure to ask a health care provider. Correct use of oral or nasal inhalers, eye drops, and skin medications is essential for therapeutic effects.
- Report problems or new symptoms to a health care provider.
- Store medications safely, in a cool, dry place. Do not store them in a bathroom; heat, light, and moisture may cause them to decompose. Do not store them near a dangerous substance, which could be taken by mistake.
- Keep medications in the container in which they were dispensed by the pharmacy, where the label identifies it and gives directions. Do not put several different tablets or capsules in one container.
- Discard outdated medications; do not keep drugs for long periods. Drugs are chemicals that may deteriorate overtime, especially if exposed to heat and moisture. In addition, having many containers increases the risks of medication errors and adverse drug interactions.

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