

“Take One Pill Every . . .”: Questions to Ask, Things to Do

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There’s no getting around it! When taking prescribed or over-the-counter medications, people need to be in the know. They need to understand and manage those medications. Why? Safety and effectiveness are the primary reasons. Make no mistake about it. All medications carry some risk of harmful reactions. These may be as minor as causing temporary discomfort or they may be life altering, but the risks are there. So says the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA) on the consumer education pages of their web site. Their approval of a drug for use, they say, simply means that, in their judgment, the drug’s expected benefits outweigh its known risks.

Because there are many things that can keep drugs from doing what they are supposed to do and, more importantly, that can make taking them unsafe, patients need to play their part on the healthcare team. Yes, doctors need to make sure that the medications they prescribe are safe and work as they should. They cannot do this, however, without the help of patients. Keep reading to see how patients, or their advocates, can help.

What Should Patients Ask and Do?

The [National Council on Patient Information and Education](#) (NCPIE), states that patients are in charge of correctly using medications, whether prescribed by doctors or purchased over-the-counter. Patients are also in charge, they say, of alerting doctors to problems that occur while taking medications. This means that they will need to write down, or somehow keep track of, the problem – noting what is happening, when it happens, how long it lasts, and so on.

What if no problems occur? Does that mean that all patients need do is take their medications as directed? Many advocates would answer: NO. The FDA and the NCPIE, are only two of many organizations that say patients play an important role in doing what can be done to avoid problems and to give medications “the room” to do what they are supposed to do. Patients, advocates say, should **give and get information** when new medications are prescribed or new over-the counter drugs are taken; and to **keep track of medications** taken.

Giving Information: What to Tell

Whether consulting with a doctor, dentist, pharmacist, or other healthcare professionals, patients should identify all the medications they are taking. They should include dietary supplements (vitamin and herbal supplements), in addition to prescribed and over-the-counter medications. It’s also important to share information about allergies, sensitivities, any other therapies they’re trying and, if relevant, their medical histories. If there is

anything that would affect their ability to take medications – like difficulty in swallowing large pills – that should be told as well.

Getting Information: What to Ask

On their websites, the FDA and NCIIE suggest that patients ask about the following:

The name of the medicine: What is the brand name? What is the generic name?

What the medicine is supposed to do: What effect should I expect?

How to Take the medication: How many pills at a time? How many times a day? How many days? Take with or without food? What should I do if I miss a dose?

What to avoid when on the medication: What prescribed or over-the-counter medicines, nutritional supplements, food and drink, activities (such as exposure to sunlight) should I avoid while taking this drug?

Side Effects: What are the possible side effects? What do I do if they occur?

When to expect results: When should I expect to see some improvement?

What monitoring needs to be done: Do any tests need to be done to check on the medication? When should I get back to you?

Information Sources: Where can I find written information on this medication?

Keeping Track of Medicines

Keeping track of all this information is difficult enough for one medicine. For people who are taking multiple medications, this can become even harder. A simple way to keep track, however, is to **use a chart**, or worksheet. Charts should include the following information: **brand and generic names** of the drug; **the condition** it is supposed to help (for instance, arthritis, heart condition); the **dosage** (# of pills, strength of pills – for example, 400 mg); how many **times per day**; and what **time(s) of day** (mealtimes, morning, bedtime, and so on). Other helpful information to include on the chart might be what to avoid while taking the drug and what problems arise after starting the drugs. If problems do arise, it would also help to chart things like: what happens, when it happens, how long it lasts. Sample medication charts can be found by clicking on [Standard-Page Chart](#) or [Legal-Page Chart](#).

More Tips

Bring your chart with you when you go to see your doctors. It will allow them to quickly and accurately see everything you are taking. You should compare the information on the chart with the information on the prescription label to make sure the charted information is correct. Remember, if the chart does not include over-the-counter and dietary supplements that you are taking, you will need to be sure you tell them about those. Another benefit of bringing the chart with you is that it can also help you when new

medications are prescribed. Its categories will remind you what to ask and, by recording the answers directly on to the chart, you will not have to worry about forgetting the answers.¹

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