

## BEYOND PILLS: EYE DROPS, PATCHES, AND SUPPOSITORIES



In this AARP Home Alone Alliance<sup>SM</sup> video, Angie takes care of her mother and is planning a week away from home. Her sister, Imani, has agreed to take over, but she hasn't done these tasks before and she's understandably a little nervous. Angie was trained by a nurse, and she feels confident in showing her sister how to use eye drops, change skin patches, and insert suppositories. Angie sees Imani's discomfort and reassures her that she'll be able to manage on her own.

You and the person who takes over for you may be responsible for doing one or two or all three of these tasks. Remember that each of these tasks involves a medication. Each one should be listed on your family member's medication record.

### About You

- > If you're a family caregiver, you need a break from time to time. You can teach another person how to take over.
- > Make sure you've had good instruction yourself. Ask a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist if you're unsure of any steps or details.
- > Recognize that someone new to the task may be uncomfortable or anxious.
- > Always wash your hands before doing any of these tasks. Use gloves to prevent medication from getting on your hands.

### Eye Drops

Eye drops are used to treat many conditions, including glaucoma, dry eye, an infection, or an allergy. Your health care provider will tell you which eye drops to use and how often to use them.

- > Wash your hands before starting.
- > Shake the bottle well before opening it, being careful not to touch the dropper tip.
- > Make sure you pull down the person's lower lid, ask her to look up, and insert the correct number of drops directly in the eye, avoiding the pupil if possible because some people find that uncomfortable.
- > Don't let the bottle touch the eye or eyelid.

- > Use a tissue to wipe any extra liquid when you're done.
- > Have the person close her eye for two minutes or more.
- > If the person needs more than one type of eye drop, wait at least five minutes between drops.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology has more information at <https://www.aaopt.org/eye-health/treatments/how-to-put-in-eye-drops>.

The Safe Medications website, created by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), has step-by-step guides on using eye drops, transdermal (skin) patches, and rectal suppositories as well as other common tasks. Here's the link to the guide on eye drops: <http://www.safemedication.com/safemed/MedicationTipsTools/HowtoAdminister/HowtoUseEyeDropsProperly>.

### Skin Patches

Transdermal (skin) patches provide a way to administer medications directly through the skin. There are different kinds of skin patches, including those used to help people stop smoking (nicotine patches), for motion sickness, a heart condition (angina), hormone treatments, and others. Patches containing fentanyl (an opiate) are used to treat pain at the end of life when the person is no longer able to swallow pills. Here are some tips to remember:

- > Make sure you understand the precautions to take when changing a skin patch. You may be instructed to apply the patch to the same area or rotate the patch among different skin areas.
- > When changing skin patches, make sure you wear gloves so the medication on the patch doesn't get on your skin. Remove the old patch, fold it, and dispose of it carefully.
- > The Safe Medication website has step-by-step instructions for applying and disposing of a used skin patch. See <http://www.safemedication.com/safemed/docs/Transdermal-Patches-Flyer.pdf>.
- > If the person is using a fentanyl or other opioid patch, ask the prescriber about serious risks and precautions. The patches should be kept away from children, who might open the package and get the medication on their hands. More information is available from MedlinePlus, a website of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, at <https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a601202.html>.

## Suppositories

- > Many people are familiar with rectal suppositories (those inserted in the rectum) to relieve constipation. But there are other kinds of suppositories (vaginal and urethral) and conditions for which suppositories may be prescribed. Often, suppositories are an option when a medication is hard to swallow. Ask the person's health care provider why suppositories are needed and how often they should be inserted.

- > Inserting a suppository in another person can be stressful for both of you. Learning to do it so it becomes routine will help minimize embarrassment.
- > Remove the suppository from packaging and apply lubricant to the suppository before you put on gloves.
- > When inserting suppositories, make sure the person is comfortable lying on her side and insert the suppository into the rectum at least an inch.
- > For a step-by-step process, go to the Safe Medication website to learn "How to Use Rectal Suppositories Properly" at <http://www.safemedication.com/safemed/MedicationTipsTools/HowtoAdminister/HowtoUseRectalSuppositoriesProperly>. Although the directions are intended for someone inserting a suppository in her own body, it's easy to adapt the instructions to do this task for another person.

If you have questions about any of the techniques, ask a doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or other healthcare professional for help.

Remember to take care of yourself as you help your family member. Find someone to talk to about your own feelings about handling this care. Look for support groups and message boards where people in similar situations share their experiences and suggestions. Remember, you are not alone!

*AARP Public Policy Institute  
Prepared by Carol Levine, United Hospital Fund*