

ORGANIZING AND ADMINISTERING PILLS



In this AARP Home Alone AllianceSM video, an anxious family caregiver goes over her mother's medications with a nurse to make sure she's following all of the instructions. The first important point to remember from the video is this: If you're not sure about any medication in any way (including pills, sprays, ointments, eye drops, skin patches, and injections), be sure to ask the prescriber, nurse, or pharmacist for help.

The second important point is that you need a way to organize the medications so they're given on the right day, at the right time, and in the right dose.

- > A nurse may suggest that you buy a pill organizer box that you fill yourself. This type of box has many different openings—for each day and the time of day each medication should be given. You have to carefully fill the pillbox, usually once a week.
- > Or ask your pharmacist if you can get a pill organizer that the pharmacy prefills and labels for you.

Further Information

The United Hospital Fund's Next Step in Care guide, *Medication Management: A Family Caregiver's Guide*, has other important suggestions. The guide is free and available in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian. You can find it at https://www.nextstepincare.org/Caregiver_Home/Medication_Management_Guide/.

Below are some excerpts from the guide, reprinted with permission.

Understanding the Prescription

Prescriptions can be very confusing. Prescriptions are often written in Latin, using terms that the prescriber and pharmacist understand. These terms tell how much and how often the medication needs to be taken. These terms will be on the prescription you bring to the pharmacy. Though you should always ask the pharmacist or doctor for clear instruction, it's a good idea to know some common codes used in prescriptions.

Here is a list of some common codes used in prescriptions:

- > Sig – You'll see this on all prescriptions; it stands for "write." It just means that the prescriber is telling the

pharmacist what to prepare and how to label the pill bottle (or another container).

- > bid – Take this medication twice a day.
- > tid – Take this medication three times a day.
- > qid – Take this medication four times a day.
- > Q 3 h – Take this medication every three hours.
- > Qd or OD – Take this medication every day.
- > Prn – Take this medication as needed.
- > PO – Take this medication by mouth."

Questions to Ask about Medication Management

Good medication management includes asking lots of questions. Here are some that many family caregivers ask:

For New Medications

- > What is the name of this medication?
- > Why does your family member need to take it?
- > What time each day should your family member take this medication?
- > Can this medication be taken with food? If it is to be taken "on an empty stomach," how many hours before or after meals?
- > Are there any foods, drinks, or activities (such as driving) to avoid when taking this medication?
- > If the medication is prescribed "as needed," how do I know when to give it?
- > Should I expect any problems such as side effects or allergic reactions? What do I watch for? What should I do if the patient has any of these problems?
- > Is this prescription for the brand name or generic form of this medication?

- > If a generic version is available, can my family member take that?
- > How much does this medication cost? Does my pharmacy have it? Will insurance pay for it? If not, how else can I get this medication?

For Medications Your Family is Taking Now

- > What should I do if my family member misses a medication dose? Should the next dose be doubled or should I give the usual dose? [Note: Most experts advise against doubling the dose.]
- > What if the patient takes too much or too little of this medication?
- > What side effects should I be on the lookout for?
- > When should the patient stop taking this medication?"

Medication Management Forms

An important part of organizing and managing medications is keeping an accurate record, which means updating it as things change. A Next Step in Care *Medication*

Management Form you can fill out and update as needed is available at https://www.nextstepincare.org/Caregiver_Home/Medication_Management_Form/. This form is free and it's available in four languages.

Another good medication management form is available from AARP. It's called *My Personal Medication Form*. You can find it at https://www.aarp.org/health/drugs-supplements/info-2007/my_personal_medication_record.html. This form is available in English and Spanish.

Call Whenever You Have Questions

Organizing and managing medications is challenging, but once you have a system in place, it's much easier to keep everything on track. But if you have any doubts or questions, don't hesitate to call the prescriber, nurse, or pharmacist.

AARP Public Policy Institute

Prepared by Carol Levine, United Hospital Fund