

Taking Your Medication Correctly

What is a prescription?

A doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant writes a prescription for a specific medication because he or she feels it will treat a medical condition in a specific way. People diagnosed with cancer may have many different medications prescribed for them, both to treat the cancer and to reduce the side effects of treatment. Today, instead of having to go to a doctor's office, hospital, or cancer center to receive treatment, a person with cancer can often take his or her medications at home.



Why do I need to take my medication(s) as directed by my doctor?

Carefully following the medication instructions that your doctor has recommended will help ensure you get the most benefit from each drug. It will also give you the best chance of success with your treatment plan. When

patients do not take their medications according to these instructions, they often experience more side effects and a lower quality of life and may even affect the effectiveness of the medications. Talk with a member of your health care team about any concerns or questions you may have before and during treatment.

How can I avoid drug interactions?

Sometimes, medications are prescribed by more than one health care provider, and it can be difficult to keep track of all of them. Before treatment begins, create a complete list of all the medications you are taking. Include all prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and dietary supplements, such as vitamins or herbal supplements. Share and discuss this list with your health care team before starting treatment to ensure nothing will interfere with the effectiveness of your cancer medication(s). It may also be helpful to fill all of your prescriptions at the same pharmacy so your pharmacist is able to keep a complete and accurate list of the medications you are taking and alert you to any possible drug interactions.

How can I keep track of my prescriptions?

People undergoing cancer treatment often have a number of different medications they must take at different times throughout the day or week. To help keep yourself organized, try to take your pills according to the medication instructions at the same time every day, such as first thing in the morning or with lunch. You can also use a weekly pill organizer case so you will know whether you've taken each day's medication. Other strategies for keeping track of your medications include creating a chart or pill calendar; posting reminders on a bulletin board, refrigerator, or in a day planner; setting automated reminders on your computer or phone's calendar application; or enlisting the help of family members or friends.

Questions to ask the the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- What is the goal of this treatment?
- How much of the medication will I need to take? How often should I take it?
- Is there a preferred time of day to take the medication?
- Do I need to take this medication with food? Or should I take it on an empty stomach?
- Are there any foods, drinks, or other drugs that can change the strength or effectiveness of this medication?
- Can I crush my pills?
- How long will I need to take this medication? Are there any reasons why I should stop taking it?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- What are the most common side effects of this medication?
- What should I do if I experience an unexpected side effect of the medication?
- What follow-up tests will I have to monitor the medication's effectiveness?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of cancer care, who can help me?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?

For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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WORDS TO KNOW

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Coexisting condition:

Health problem a person has in addition to cancer

Drug interaction:

Changes in the effects of a drug caused by a reaction with another drug, food, beverage, or coexisting medical condition

Medical oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer with medication

Oncology nurse:

A nurse who specializes in caring for people with cancer

Over-the-counter drug:

A medication that can be bought without a prescription

Pharmacist:

A person who is trained and licensed to prepare, sell, and give information about prescription medications

Physician assistant:

A person who is trained and licensed to diagnose disease, provide medical care, and write prescriptions

Prescription medication:

A medication that is only available from a pharmacy with written instructions from a doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant

Symptom management:

The relief of side effects, also called palliative or supportive care

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