Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# How To Fill a Pill Box

This information explains how to fill a pill box.

## What is a pill box?

A pill box is a container used to organize your medicine doses for a certain length of time. A pill box is also called a pill container or pill case. Using a pill box is very helpful if you need to take a few different medicines. It will help you avoid missing doses of your medicine.

Pill boxes come in many sizes (see Figures 1 and 2). They can hold your medicine doses for up to 14 days. Some have up to 4 spaces for each day. If you are not sure which type is best for you, ask your healthcare provider.

Figure 1. An example of a pill box

Figure 2. An example of a pill box

Most pill boxes are not child safe. If there are children in your home, keep your pill box in a place they cannot reach.

If other people in your home use a pill box, it's helpful if they are not the same color. This keeps you from getting them mixed up.

# What to know before filling your pill box

**Only put your standing medicine (medicine you take on a schedule) in your pill box.**

Some medicines are not safe to put in a pill box. This includes oral chemotherapy (chemo). Follow your care team's instructions for using a pill box.

Oral research study medicines must stay in the container it came in. **Do not put these in a pill box.** Follow your research study care team's instructions for storing oral research study medicine.

If you have PRN medicine (medicine you take only when you need them), keep them separate. This includes medicine for pain or nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up). Do not put PRN medicine in your pill box.

Your Home Medication List may not say which day to take the medicine. If so, choose which day you want to take it. For example, if it says to take a medicine once a week, you can choose to take it on Mondays. Write your choice of on your Home Medication List next to the medicine.

Your Home Medication List may not say what time of day to take it. If so, choose the time you want to take it. For example, your Home Medication List may say to take a medicine daily, but not what time of day. You can choose to take that medicine every day in the morning. Write your choice on your Home Medication List next to the medicine.

The instructions on your Home Medication List may be different than the instructions on the bottles. This can happen if your healthcare provider changes your medicine dose or schedule more often than you refill your medicine.

**Always follow the instructions on your Home Medication List, not the instructions on the medicine bottles.** Your Home Medication List has the most up-to-date information about your medicine.

Fill your pill box once a week. It's best if you fill your pill box same day each week, or after a follow-up visit. Put all your standing medicine for the week in it each time you fill it.

**Ask for help filling your pill box if you need it.**

If you have arthritis, peripheral neuropathy, or trouble with your memory, it can be hard to fill your pill box. Ask a family member, friend, or visiting nurse to help you. You can also ask your pharmacy to put your medicine in non-childproof bottles that are easier to open.

# Instructions for filling a pill box

Please visit www.mskcc.org/pe/pillbox-video to watch this video.

Set up your supplies on a clean, flat surface. You'll need:

- Your pill box.
- The medicine you take on a schedule.
- Your Home Medication List.
- A disposable (throw-away) towel.
- Soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

## Clean your hands

If you're washing your hands with soap and water, wet your hands and put soap on them. Rub your hands together for 20 seconds, then rinse the soap off. Dry your hands with a disposable towel. Use the same towel to turn off the faucet.

If you're using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, cover your hands with it. Then rub your hands together until they're dry.

## Line up your medicine bottles

Line up your medicine bottles in the order they appear on your Home Medication List. If you have more than 1 bottle of the same medicine, put the bottles next to each other.

## Fill your pill box

Start with the first medicine on your Home Medication List. Put all of the doses of that medicine into your pill box before moving on to the next one.

For each medicine:

1. Check your Home Medication List to see what dose you need to take.
2. Check the medicine strength on the pill bottle(s). Figure out the number of pills needed to make the right dose. You may need to use more than 1 pill to make the right dose.
3. Sometimes you may need to use pills of different strengths to make the right dose. For example, for a 2.5 milligram (mg) dose, you may need 1 (0.5 mg) pill and 2 (1 mg) pills.
4. Check your Home Medication List to see when you need to take the medicine.
5. Put 1 dose of the medicine in the matching space(s). For example:
    - For daily medicine you take in the morning, put 1 dose in the morning space for each day.
    - For medicine you take every 12 hours, put 1 dose in the morning space for each day. Then put another dose in the evening space for each day.
6. Put doses for each day into your pill box. Fill all of the doses for each day of your pill box, or up until your next clinic visit.
7. Put the cap back on the pill bottle. Put the bottle back where you store the medicine you take on a schedule.

Repeat these steps for each medicine on your Home Medication List.

As you fill your pill box, keep track of how much of each medicine you have left. Ask your healthcare provider for refills 5 or more days before a medicine will run out. Sometimes, it takes a day or 2 for the medicine to be ready.

# What to do after filling your pill box

When you're finished filling your pill box, close each of the spaces. Put it in a plastic bag. That way, if it gets knocked over and accidentally opens, the pills will spill into the bag. Put your Home Medication List in the bag with the pill box. Store your pill box in a cool, dry place away from sunlight.

**It can be very dangerous to miss doses or take extra doses of your medicine.**

Always take your medicine the right way, at the right time, and at the right doses. Read *How to Take Your Medications Safely* (www.mskcc.org/pe/take-medicine-safely) for more information.

Call your healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns about your medicine.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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