Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

How to Take Your Medicine Safely

This information explains how to take your medicine safely after you're discharged (sent home) from the hospital.

It can be 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.

What to do before you're discharged

For each of your medicines, try to learn:

- The name of each medicine.
- Why you're taking it.
- How often you need to take it.
- The pill or tablet strength.
- How many of each pill or tablet you need to take to get the right dose.

Make sure you:

- Understand your Home Medication List.
- Know how to fill a pill box if you plan to use one.
- Know how to read the labels on your medicine bottles.

It's helpful if your caregiver learns with you so they can help you, if needed. They can do this even if you feel confident managing your medicines on your own.

If you have questions or concerns about your medicine, ask your nurse or pharmacist before you leave the hospital. If you don't want to use a pill box, talk with your nurse and pharmacist. Agree on a plan for how you'll manage your medicine.

What to do after you're discharged



- **Never stop taking any of your medicine without talking with your healthcare provider first.**
- **Don't take any other medicine unless your healthcare provider tells you it's safe.** This includes dietary supplements, such as herbal supplements, vitamins, and minerals, and over-the-counter medicine (medicine you get without a prescription).

Bring your Home Medication List to all your visits. Make sure you get an updated list at every visit. A member of your care team should give you one. Throw away your old Home Medication Lists so they don't get mixed up with your current list.

Your healthcare provider may change your medicine dosage or schedule between visits. If they do, write the change on your Home Medication List.

Take your medicine

The instructions on your Home Medication List may be different than the instructions on the bottles. This can happen if your care team 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 medicines.

Set reminders so you remember to take your medicine. Use alarm clocks, timers, or a smart watch. Planning doses with meals can also help.

Some of your medicine may make you feel nauseous (like you're going to throw up). Sometimes, just thinking about taking your medicine can make you feel nauseous. Follow these tips to help prevent nausea:

- Take an anti-nausea medicine. Do this 30 minutes before taking your other medicine.
- Some medicines are safe to take with food. Have a meal or snack just before or when you take these medicines.
- You may need to take some of your medicine when your stomach is empty. Don't eat before or when you take these medicines. Follow the instructions on your Home Medication List or from your healthcare provider. Don't take your other medicine on an empty stomach, especially first thing in the morning.
- Don't try to swallow all of your pills at the same time, especially first thing in the morning.

Order medicine refills

Don't let your medicine run out. Keep track of when you need refills. Ask for a refill 5 or more days before the medicine runs out. Sometimes, it takes a day or two for the medicine to be ready.

Once you use all the refills, you'll need a new prescription. Ask your healthcare provider to write a new prescription to get more of the medicine.

Try not to use too many different pharmacies to fill your medicine. Sometimes, different pharmacies use different brands of the same medicine. Even though the medicine is the same, the pills might look different. This can be confusing.

Store your medicine

Store standing medicine separate from PRN medicine, if you have them. For example, keep standing medicine bottles in a labeled bag, separate from PRN medicine.

- Standing medicines are medicines you take on a schedule.
- PRN medicines are medicines you take only when you need them, such as anti-nausea or pain medicine.

Fill your pill box

If you plan to use a bill box, read *How To Fill a Pill Box* (www.mskcc.org/pe/pill-box) to learn more.

When to call your care team

Call your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist if you:

- Need a medicine refill. Call 5 or more days before you run out.
- Have trouble with your medicine.
- Have questions 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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