



---

## PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# How to Take Your Medications Safely

This information will help you take your medications safely after you're discharged from the hospital.

It can be very dangerous to miss doses or take extra doses of your medications. Always take your medications the right way, at the right time, and at the right doses.

## What to Do Before Discharge

- For each of your medications, try to learn:
  - The medication's name
  - Why you're taking it
  - How often you need to take it
  - The pill or tablet strength
  - How many pills or tablets you need to take to get the right dose

It's very helpful if your caregiver learns with you. Even if you feel confident managing your medications on your own, it's best if you have someone to help you if needed.

- Make sure you understand your Home Medication List, know how to fill a pill box, and know how to read the labels on your medication bottles.
- If you don't want to use a pill box, talk with your nurse and pharmacist. Agree on a plan for how you will manage your medications.
- If you have questions or concerns about any of your medications, ask your nurse or pharmacist before you leave the hospital.

## What to Do After Discharge



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

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

list.

If your healthcare provider changes your medication dose or schedule between visits, write the change on your Home Medication List.

## Taking your medications

- The instructions on your medication bottles and Home Medication List may be different. This can happen if your healthcare provider changes your medication dose or schedule more often than you refill your medications. **Always follow the instructions on your Home Medication List, not your medication bottles.** Your Home Medication List has the most up-to-date information about your medications.
- Set reminders so you remember to take your medications. Use alarm clocks, timers, or a smart watch. Planning doses with meals can also be helpful.
- Some of your medications may make you feel nauseous (like you're going to throw up). Sometimes, just thinking about taking your medications can make you feel nauseous. Follow the tips below to help prevent nausea.
  - Take an anti-nausea medication 30 minutes before taking your other medications.
  - If it's OK to take your medication with food, have a meal or snack just before or when you take your medications. Don't

take your medications on an empty stomach, especially first thing in the morning.

- You may need to take some of your medications when your stomach is empty. If you do, don't eat before or when you take them. Follow the instructions on your Home Medication List or from your healthcare provider.
- Don't try to swallow all your pills at the same time, especially first thing in the morning.

## Ordering medication refills

- **Don't let your medications run out.** Keep track of when you need medication refills. Request a refill 5 or more days before the medication runs out. Sometimes, it takes a day or two for the medication to be ready.
- Try not to use too many different pharmacies to fill your medications. Sometimes, different pharmacies use different brands of the same medication. Even though the medication is the same, the pills might look different. This can be confusing.

## Storing your medications

- Store the medications you take on a schedule separate from the medications you take only when you need them (such as anti-nausea or pain medication). For example, keep the bottles in a separate labeled bag.

## Filling your pill box

- For information about filling your pill box, read the resource *How to Fill Your Pill Box* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/pill\\_box](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/pill_box)).

## When to Call Your Healthcare Provider

Call your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist if you:

- Need a medication refill. Remember to call 5 or more days before you run out.
- Have trouble with your medications.
- Have questions about your medications.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

---

How to Take Your Medications Safely - Last updated on June 3, 2020  
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center