

# Medication Management: A Family Caregiver's Guide

## Types of Medications

Medications are not all the same. There are three basic types:



You should make sure all of your family member's doctors and the home care nurse know all the over-the-counter and herbal medications your family member is taking.

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- ▶ **Prescription medications.** These are ordered by a doctor or nurse practitioner and filled at a pharmacy or by mail order. Prescription medications can be either "generic" or "brand-name." These medication types are nearly the same, but generic medications often cost less. Doctors may want patients to use brand-name medications for certain conditions.
- ▶ **Over-the-counter medications (OTC).** These are sold without a prescription. They include aspirin, laxatives, cold medicines, and others.
- ▶ **Herbal medications.** These include vitamins, dietary supplements, and herbal teas that are sold at pharmacies, health food stores, or botanicas.

Medications can come in one or more forms: pills or capsules, liquids, patches, medicated creams, inhalers, injectable solutions, chewable or dissolving agents, suppositories, ointments, eye drops, or ear drops.

## Medication Management

As a family caregiver, you may be giving your family member one or more medications. Doing so includes these tasks:

- ▶ Order prescriptions and pick up refills at the pharmacy, or arrange to get them by mail order.
- ▶ Read medication labels and follow all instructions.
- ▶ Give the right medication at the right time and in the right amount. You may be the one doing this, or you may need to teach others to do it right.

### Important Things to Know About Medications

- ▶ Notice any side effects or other medication problems. Side effects can include nausea and vomiting, confusion or dizziness. Call the doctor or home care nurse if you notice any problems or have questions about medication.
- ▶ Check the medication bottle for an expiration or “use by” date. Medications may not be safe after this date. Throw away any medications that are not being used or that have passed the “use by” date.
- ▶ Make sure that no one else takes your family member’s medication.
- ▶ Keep all medications in a safe place. Some need to be in the refrigerator. All medications must be kept away from children.



**Remember:**  
Notice side effects.  
Check for expiration date.  
Don’t share medications.  
Keep them in a safe place.

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## Understanding the Prescription

Prescriptions can be very confusing. Prescriptions are often written in Latin, using terms that the doctor and the 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.

## Medication Management

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

**Sig** – You’ll see this on all prescriptions; it stands for “write.” It just means that the doctor is telling the pharmacist what to prepare and how to label the pill bottle (or other 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** – Take this medication every day.

**Prn** – Take this medication as needed.

**Po** – Take this medication by mouth

## Medication Reconciliation



Keep an up-to-date medication list. Review this list every time there is a change.

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Medication reconciliation is a way to check that all the over the counter and prescription medications your family member uses, are correct. The best way to do this is with a list, making sure that no medications are extra or missing. It can be hard to keep an up-to-date list as medications often change. This happens a lot when people have a new diagnosis (condition) or move from one place to another, such as going from the hospital to a nursing home.

Here are some ways you can help with medication reconciliation:

- ▶ Keep a current (up-to-date) medication list. Add all new medications, and erase or cross off ones your family member no longer takes.
- ▶ Put this list where you can quickly find it, even during an emergency.
- ▶ Bring this medication list each time your family member goes to a doctor or is admitted to the hospital or nursing home.
- ▶ Discuss all the medications with your family member’s doctor. Ask whether there are any side effects or other problems to watch for. Let the doctor know if your family member also takes other medications or has any allergies to medication.

## Common Medication Problems

Common Medication Problems	What You Can Do
<p><b>Problems related to the name of the medication.</b> The name of the medication you get from the pharmacy is not always the same as the name the doctor wrote in the prescription for a “brand” name while the pharmacy gave you the same medication in its “generic” name. This can happen when insurance will only pay for the generic form.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ask the doctor if the name on the prescription is brand or generic.</li> <li>▶ Ask the doctor if it matters whether your family member takes the brand-name or generic version of this medication.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problems reading the prescription.</b></p> <p>You should compare the written prescription with the medication you get from the pharmacy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Tell the doctor or nurse if you cannot read what he or she writes in the prescription.</li> <li>▶ Ask your doctor to write this more clearly.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problems getting prescriptions filled.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Insurance may not pay for certain prescriptions.</li> <li>▶ The pharmacy may not accept your family member’s insurance as payment.</li> <li>▶ The pharmacy may not have the medication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Talk with your family member’s doctor or nurse. He or she may help you figure out a solution.</li> <li>▶ Call the insurance company to see if they can help you.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problems hearing what the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist is saying.</b> This can happen when the other person is rushed or you are talking in a noisy place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Tell people you cannot hear, and ask them to speak louder.</li> <li>▶ Ask people to write what they are saying so you can read it later.</li> <li>▶ Make sure you understand everything you need before leaving the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist. It will be more difficult to get answers later.</li> </ul>

Common Medication Problems	What You Can Do
<p><b>Problems remembering to take medications.</b></p> <p>It is easy to forget to take medications on time, even more so when your family member needs to take two or more medications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Use special pill boxes that have sections to put pills for each meal and for bedtime. Some boxes even beep or make another noise when it is time to take Medication.</li> <li>▶ Ask about special bottles with caps that count how many times the bottle has been opened (a way of knowing how many pills have been taken).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Problems opening pill bottles or giving medications the correct way.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ask the doctor or pharmacist to make a medication plan that fits your schedule.</li> <li>▶ Use special pill boxes that have sections to put medication for different days and different times of the day.</li> <li>▶ Ask about automatic pill boxes that can be set to open at specific times.</li> </ul>

**Notes and Questions**

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## 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?
- ▶ What if the patient takes too much or too little of this medication?
- ▶ When should the patient stop taking this medication?

## Mail Order

Many insurers and some pharmacies have mail order plans for medications. This service can be especially helpful if your family member is going to take some medications for a long time. Most mail order plans let you get enough medications to last 90 days instead of the 30 days that regular plans offer. Mail order plans can save money because the larger orders are cheaper. They also save time because you won't have to go to the pharmacy so often. Another benefit is that the plan will give you a complete list of all the medications ordered, which will help you keep your family member's medication list up to date.

Contact your family member's insurance company to find out whether it offers mail order services. If it does, ask what to do to enroll in the program. You can also ask your local pharmacists if they offer any mail order or delivery services.

## Financial Assistance

If your family member cannot afford to pay for a medication that a doctor ordered, be sure to tell that to the doctor. Ask about other ways to get the medication. You can also discuss with the doctor or social worker whether there are programs that provide financial assistance for medications. For example, **Needy Meds** is a program that offers assistance to low-income, uninsured and underinsured people who cannot pay for their medications. For more information about the services they offer visit [www.needymeds.com](http://www.needymeds.com). Pharmaceutical companies might offer financial assistance on specific medications as well.