The Importance of Taking Your Medication Correctly

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During cancer treatment you may have a number of different medications to take at home, both to treat the cancer and to reduce the side effects of treatment. To make sure you get the most benefit from these medications, it is important to take them exactly as your doctor or pharmacist tells you.

Common medication mistakes

Many people taking prescription medications do not follow their doctors? instructions. Some common reasons for this are:

- People may start feeling better and decide to not finish all of the medication.
- It may be difficult to remember the prescribed schedule, particularly when taking multiple medications at different times of the day or having to take a medication on a different schedule, such as once a week.
- People may not notice an improvement in their symptoms right away and may stop taking the medication because they think it is not working.
- Many people are not sure what to do if they miss or skip a dose of the medication.
- Some medications are expensive, and people may skip doses or take less than they were prescribed to try to save money.

Staying on your medication schedule

Your doctor has prescribed a particular medication because he or she feels it will treat your condition in a specific way. However, this medication is more likely to be effective if you follow your medication course as prescribed. Always talk with your doctor before changing when and how you take your medication.

Here are some tips to help you get the most benefit from your prescribed treatment:

- Read the entire label of the medication container to make sure you are taking the correct dose. Double check with your doctor, nurse, physician assistant, or pharmacist if you are unsure about how much to take.
- Take your pills at the same time every day, such as first thing in the morning or with lunch.
- Use a weekly pill organizer case so you will know whether you've taken each day's medication. However, always keep the original medication container for reference.
- Develop a chart or pill calendar to keep track of when you take your medication.
- Keep at least one daily reminder somewhere in your house?such as on a bulletin board, the refrigerator, or in a day planner?to help you remember to take your medication.
- Use technology to help you remember. For example, set up an automated reminder on your computer or phone?s calendar software.
- Enlist the help of family members or friends to help remind you if you think that you won't remember.

If you are worried about managing the cost of your treatment, it is important to discuss your concerns with a member of your health care team. He or she should be able to direct you to local resources that provide financial assistance. There are also national resources for financial support [2] that you can contact for more information.

Avoiding potential drug interactions

Drug interactions occur when a medication reacts with another drug or supplement you are taking, with something you?ve had to eat or drink, or with another medical condition. For example, grapefruit juice is known to interfere with several medications. This interaction can cause unexpected side effects or reduce or increase the strength of the cancer medication.

Before treatment begins, create a complete list of all the medications you are taking and discuss this list with your health care team. You should include all prescription medications, over-the-counter (non-prescription) drugs, and dietary supplements, such as vitamins or herbal supplements. On this same list, be sure to note any allergies you may have to any medications. Keeping your entire health care team informed about all of the medications, vitamins, and other supplements you are taking is key to ensuring that nothing will interfere with the effectiveness of your cancer treatment. Also, keep a copy of this list someplace like a purse or wallet so it?s always handy for easy reference during your treatment.

In addition, all medications come with a written information sheet, called a medication profile, which describes the drug, its side effects, and any potential drug interactions. Review this information with a member of your health care team before starting any new medication to avoid any unintended effects. It is also important to keep the medication profile you receive when you fill your prescription in a safe place so you can refer to it in the future.

Another helpful strategy is to fill all of your prescriptions at the same pharmacy so your pharmacist can keep a complete and accurate list of the

medications you are taking and alert you to any possible drug interactions. If you have to fill your prescription at another pharmacy or if you use a mail-order prescription service, notify your usual pharmacist so it can be added to your medication record. Also be sure to tell your pharmacist if you are allergic to any medications.

Your pharmacist may also be able to assist by providing easy-to-read, color-coded labels that simplify the process of taking your medications. In addition, ask if the pharmacy can send email or phone messages to help remind you to refill your prescriptions. Some pharmacies offer automatic refills for some medications so you don?t run out.

Questions to ask the doctor

Once you and your doctor have decided on your treatment plan, be sure to ask your doctor, physician assistant, or nurse the following questions about each cancer medication you've been prescribed:

- What is the goal of this medication?
- How much of this medication will I need to take?
- How often will I need to take the medication?
- Is there a preferred time of day to take the medication?
- Do I need to take the 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 continue taking this medication?
- Why is it important for me to stay on schedule while taking this medication?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- What are the common side effects of this medication?
- What follow-up tests will I have to monitor the medication's effectiveness?
- What should I do if I experience an unexpected side effect to the medication?
- Who can help me if I?m worried about managing the cost of my medication(s)?

You may want to ask the doctor to write down any instructions so you can review them later. Also, keep the phone number of your doctor?s office handy in case you have other questions.

More Information

Safe Storage and Disposal of Cancer Medications [3]

Drug Information Resources [4]

Managing Side Effects [5]

About Dietary and Herbal Supplements [6]

Managing the Cost of Cancer Care [7]

ASCO Answers: The Importance of Taking Your Medication Correctly [8]

Additional Resources

U.S. Food and Drug Administration: Are You Taking Medication as Prescribed? [9]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25370
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/29306
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25369
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25238
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25039
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24865
[8] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_taking_meds_correctly.pdf
[9] http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm164616.htm