

Taking Your Medication Correctly

■ What is a prescription?

A doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant writes a prescription for a specific medication because they feel it will treat a medical condition in a specific way. People with cancer may have many different medications prescribed for them. These medications may be used to treat the cancer or to reduce the side effects of treatment. Today, instead of having to go to a doctor's office, hospital, or cancer center to receive treatment, a person with cancer can often take their medications at home.

■ Why do I need to take my medication(s) as directed?

You will get the most benefit from each drug if you carefully follow the medication instructions as recommended. This will also give your treatment plan the best chance of success. Not taking medications according to these instructions can lead to more side effects and a lower quality of life. It may even affect how well the medications work. Talk with a member of your health care team about any concerns or questions you may have before and during treatment.

■ How can I avoid drug interactions?

Drug interactions happen when a medication reacts with another medication or supplement you take. A medication can also react with something you ate or drank or with another medical condition. This interaction can cause unexpected side effects or reduce or increase the medication's strength.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to keep track of all of your medications. Before treatment begins, create a list of all the medications you are taking. Include all prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and dietary supplements, such as vitamins or herbal supplements. Share and discuss this list with your health care team before starting treatment to make sure nothing changes the effectiveness of your cancer medication(s). It may be helpful to fill all of your prescriptions at the same pharmacy. That way your pharmacist has a complete list of the medications you are taking and can alert you to any possible drug interactions.

■ How can I keep track of my prescriptions?

Try to take your pills according to the medication instructions at the same time every day, such as first thing in the morning or with lunch. You can also use a weekly pill organizer case so you will know whether you've taken each day's medication. Other strategies for keeping track of your medications include creating a chart or pill calendar; posting reminders on a bulletin board, on the refrigerator, or in a day planner; setting automated reminders on your computer or phone's calendar application; or asking family members or friends to help remind you. Ask your health care team what to do if you miss or skip a dose.



Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. It can be helpful to bring someone along to your appointments to take notes. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- ▶ What is the goal of this medication?
- ▶ How much of the medication will I need to take? How often should I take it?
- ▶ Is there a preferred time of day to take the medication?
- ▶ Do I need to take this 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 take this medication? Are there any reasons why I should stop taking it?
- ▶ What should I do if I miss a dose?
- ▶ What are the most common side effects of this medication?
- ▶ What should I do if I have an unexpected side effect of the medication?
- ▶ What follow-up tests will be used to monitor the medication's effectiveness?
- ▶ If I'm worried about managing the costs of cancer care, who can help me?
- ▶ If I have a question or problem, who should I call?

For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

Words to Know

Chemotherapy: The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells.

Coexisting condition: Health problem a person has in addition to cancer.

Drug interaction: Changes in the effects of a drug caused by a reaction with another drug, food, beverage, or coexisting medical condition.

Medical oncologist: A doctor who specializes in treating cancer with medication.

Oncology nurse: A nurse who specializes in caring for people with cancer.

Over-the-counter drug: A medication that can be bought without a prescription.

Pharmacist: A person who is trained and licensed to prepare, sell, and give information about prescription medications.

Physician assistant: A person who is trained and licensed to diagnose disease, provide medical care, and write prescriptions.

Prescription medication: A medication that is only available from a pharmacy with written instructions from a doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant.

Supportive care: The relief of side effects, also called palliative care.

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AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CLINICAL ONCOLOGY

2318 Mill Road, Suite 800, Alexandria, VA 22314

Toll Free: 888-651-3038 | Phone: 571-483-1300

www.asco.org | www.cancer.net | www.conquer.org

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