

HOW TO TAKE MEDICINES SAFELY



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To treat her diabetes a patient has two different injectable insulins: one that meets her basic requirements and acts slowly throughout the day and a second which she injects at mealtimes and which rapidly lowers her blood sugar. She is about to inject her daily insulin dose in the morning. The patient has poor vision and mistakenly injects the other fast-acting insulin that was on her bedside table. The mistake only comes to light when her blood sugar is found to be very low when checked by nursing staff.

DEAR READER,

The example described here is precisely what happened in a Berlin hospital. It demonstrates something you perhaps know from your own experience. Often, it's not easy to take medicines exactly as per the instructions. You're not the only one with this problem. It is estimated that one in two people does not take their long-term medicines correctly. However, the correct taking of medicines is important for successful treatment. This patient information leaflet explains how to take your medicines safely.

At a glance: How to take medicines safely

- For successful treatment it is important to take your medicines in a reliable way and as prescribed by your doctor.
- Some obstacles may make this more difficult such as stress, the parallel taking of several medicines, switching to a different active ingredient, unclear instructions on use or adverse drug reactions.
- There are several ways to improve how you take your medicines. The most important thing is: talk to your doctor. Your doctor needs to know exactly which medicines you are taking and how you take them.

DIFFICULTIES IN TAKING MEDICINES

There are numerous reasons why medicines are not used correctly:

- The hustle and bustle of daily life or simply forgetfulness can lead to irregular use.
- Anyone who takes several medicines, may lose track more quickly. One in three people over the age of 65 takes four or more medicines.
- Medicines often come with package leaflets that contain a wealth of information. Not everyone understands how to take their medicine correctly.
- Older people in particular have problems with their eyes or hands and this is an additional obstacle to taking medication correctly.
- Some people are worried if they are not given their usual medicine in the pharmacy. It may be that the same active ingredient is packaged differently, has a different name or the form and colour are not the same.
- Every medicine can provoke adverse drug reactions. Sometimes people change the dosage themselves or stop taking their medicines without consulting their doctor.
- Non-prescribed medicines which are available over the counter in the pharmacy or drugstore may have side-effects, too.
- Different active ingredients may interact with each other. Sometimes, foods also react with medicines. For instance, some antibiotics are less effective if you take them with milk.
- It is often difficult for people who have no physical complaints to keep taking their medicines on a long-term basis, for instance to treat high blood pressure.

Studies have shown that failure to take medicines correctly leads to an increased number of hospital admissions.

▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can do a great deal to ensure you take your medicines correctly. Here are some tips to help you:

- A doctor should be the main person you contact about all questions to do with medicines, for instance your general practitioner.
- Have your doctor explain calmly to you how you should take your medicines. Ask questions if there's something you haven't understood. And request written information to take home with you.
- Ask your doctor for what is known as a *medication plan*. The medication plan should contain all prescribed medicines and any medication you purchased yourself. Have over-the-counter medications added to your medication plan in the pharmacy. This doesn't just mean pills but also, for instance, sprays, drops or ointments. Herbal remedies, vitamins and the like should also be included.
- Always have your medication plan on you. Show your medication plan each time you visit your doctor, a pharmacy or a hospital.
- Mention any fears or problems encountered when taking your medicines, for instance if you find it hard to swallow pills.
- Feel free to ask if you still really need to take all these medicines. Studies have shown: the fewer pills a person has to take, the more successful the treatment will be. But don't stop taking any medicines without consulting your doctor.
- If you have to take complicated medicines or have a long-term illness, ask whether there are special training sessions available.
- Inform your doctor, too, if you experience any physical complaints whilst taking your medicine.

- If there is a set time for taking your medicines, be sure to stick to it. In the case of some medicines it is important that you take them before, during or after a meal.
- Incorporate taking your medicines into your daily routine. For instance, you could systematically take your medicines before brushing your teeth or after the evening news.
- Use little reminders. Set your alarm clock or your mobile phone. Or ask family members to remind you to take your medicine. Little notes posted on a mirror or the fridge may also be helpful.

▶ HELPFUL AIDS

Aids make it easier to take medicines and often they are not expensive.

If you have problems with your hands, for example stiff finger joints, then the following aids may be useful:

- pill extractors
- pill dividers
- medicine bottle openers
- dosing devices for eye drops

People with impaired vision may find the following helpful:

- magnifying glasses, for instance scaled magnifying glasses for insulin injections
- devices to facilitate the application of eye drops

To help with forgetfulness and provide a better overview, the following are suitable:

- pill organisers with daily or weekly sections that help you to easily check whether you have taken a pill or not
- a list of all the medicines (medication plan) you are taking

▶ MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and links

This information is based on the latest scientific research findings and recommendations for patients from patients, and on a case study from the reporting and learning system network CIRS Berlin.

Methodology and sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/sichere-arzneimitteltherapie#methodik

Brief information "Am I taking too many medicines?": www.patienten-information.de

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