

# Medication Management



## Introduction

Managing medications is an important part of caregiving that can be challenging. Depending on a person's needs and abilities, assistance with medication management may vary between caregivers.

There can be a lot to organize:

- Monitoring the timing of when medications are taken
- What needs to be taken with medication (food, other meds, etc.)
- Being aware of possible side effects

If not managed properly, medication problems could lead to complications. In fact, the more medication a person takes, the higher the risk that a complication can occur.

## Did you know?

- It is very common for older adults to be taking five or more medications.
- Approximately one in every four older adults are taking 10 or more medications.
- The number of different medications can add up over time. Sometimes this is a result of seeing different specialists for different health issues.
- Some medications, when taken with others can cause problems like falls, dizziness, changes in how the heart pumps, confusion, sleepiness, changes in nutrition, bladder health and bowel issues, nausea and/or vomiting, etc.
- One of the most effective solutions to managing multiple medications is to maintain an up-to-date medications list and have a professional review it regularly.

You may have questions about medications, such as:

- How do you manage medications for another person safely?
- What if the person you care for does not want to take their medications?
- How do you speak to a health care professional about their medications?

These are some of the questions this chapter may help you answer. By applying, and adapting the strategies in this chapter, you can help enhance the safe medication use for the person you care for.

**Polypharmacy** is a medical term that describes taking many medications including prescribed and/or over-the-counter and herbal/supplemental products.

The information in this chapter is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health care professional. Please consult your health care professional for advice about specific medical conditions. Look for our helpful tips to communicate with health care professionals.

## Manage Medications Safely

### How do you assist the person you care for to take their medications safely?

To get the most out of the medications taken and lower the risk of complications, it is important to check that medications are being taken correctly. This starts with keeping a good management system. The following list highlights some strategies that you can use to assist a person in taking their medications correctly, as prescribed.

#### Write it Down.

- A medication chart is a helpful tool to track all important information about the medications you are managing in one place. When completed, this chart may help you monitor symptoms and communicate with others.
- Be sure to include all medications taken in the medication chart, including prescription and non-prescription or over-the-counter medications (e.g. herbal remedies, vitamins and minerals). Non-prescription medications may interact with prescription medications or with each other and your health profession will want to review these with you.
- For an example of a medication chart, see: [Tool 6.1: Medication Chart Template](#).



### Follow Instructions.

- Follow the instructions for all medications prescribed.
- Some medications require you to follow strict instructions while some allow flexibility to suit the person's lifestyle.
- Discuss any situation, social habit, and/or lifestyle choice that may influence how a medication is taken with a health care professional.

### Organize.

- Blister packs, bubble packs, dose organizers, or multi-dose packs are options that can assist a person experiencing frailty to take medications correctly and independently.
- These devices help organize a person's pills in advance, according to the correct days and times that they should be taken.
- Ask your pharmacist about how they can help you organize the medications in a way that works for you and the person you care for.

### Be Consistent.

- There are benefits to developing a relationship with one pharmacy/pharmacist, including having accurate and up-to-date records of all medications and health history in one place.
- Labels should be consistent for all medications. Consistent labeling ensures easy access to instructions. If you or the person you provide care for has vision problems, you may request your pharmacy to make the labels bigger.
- Sticking to the same routine each day will make it easier to remember.

### Follow Up.

- Health conditions change over time and the dosage of medications may reflect this. Consider meeting with a pharmacist for regular medication reviews to ensure the medications being taken are appropriate.

### Myths about Medications

**X** *Medications that have been taken for a long time do not need to be checked or changed.*

There are natural changes that occur in the body as it ages (e.g. decreased kidney and liver function, decreased total body water and higher proportion of body fat). An older person experiencing frailty is at risk of poor outcomes if the medications they are taking are not reviewed often and adjusted when appropriate.

**X** *Alternatives to medications do not work*

Using alternative approaches to achieve wellness, healing and symptom management can be effective. These approaches can take many forms. Some examples include: yoga, deep breathing, meditation, massage, acupuncture, art and music therapy, and many more.

## Encouraging Someone to Take Their Medications

### What do you do if the person you care for says “no”?

As a caregiver, it may feel frustrating if a person refuses to take medication as prescribed. Be creative and test strategies until you find one or two that work for you. The following are some suggested strategies that may help if the person you are caring for says “no” to medications:

#### Find out why.

Find a calm and relaxed time to ask the person about why they do not want to take their medications. Finding out why someone refuses may help to solve some unknown issues. Consider the following questions to ask:

- What is this medication is for? Why are you taking it?
- How does this medication make you feel after taking it? Do you feel sick, dizzy, too sleepy?
- Do you believe something bad may happen if you take this medication (e.g. addiction to pain medication)?
- Is the medication working for you?
- Is it the taste or difficulty swallowing pills?

Together, you and the person you care for should share these answers with the prescribing health care professional and talk about solutions.

#### Respect their wishes.

- Have a conversation with the person you care for about their priorities regarding the medications they take and the quality of life they want to have.
- Their wishes may be different than yours or the prescribing health care professional.
- It is okay for a person to refuse medications if they can understand and appreciate the consequences of that refusal.
- Before stopping any medication, it is important that you speak to a health care professional for assistance.

#### Alter the schedule if needed.

- Talk to your pharmacist about altering the timing of medications to better suit the person you provide care for.
- For example, a person may be more likely to refuse a medication if they are being wakened too early in the morning.



### Keep it simple.

- Try to reduce the number of times medications have to be taken each day. Talk to your pharmacist about how to get the doses and number of times to the lowest amount possible.
- Create an organized way to manage multiple medications (blister packs, pill organizers, checklist, etc.). Having 10 pill bottles on the counter may look too overwhelming and cause a person to refuse.

### Stay calm.

- When a person refuses, there may be missed doses. This is not your fault. All you can do is try your best.
- Talk to your pharmacist about if and when you should be concerned when doses are missed and what to do about it should this happen.

### Don't force it.

- In many cases, a person has the right to refuse to take medication.
- Speak to a health care professional about your role in managing medications in accordance with the person's level of competence, and their goals and wishes.
- A competent person is able to appreciate and understand the consequences of their choice. For instance, a person who can explain what the pill is for, why they refuse it and what may happen if they refuse it is considered competent to make that decision.
- If you are concerned about a person's competence, you are encouraged to speak to a health care professional. Ideally, speak to the professional who has prescribed the medication being refused.

## Medications and Dementia

People who live with dementia may refuse medications more often. Try the following tips:

### Stay cheerful.

- Keeping positive is an important aspect of dementia care. A calm and gentle approach builds trust and lowers anxiety in the person living with dementia.

### Keep it simple.

- Talk to a qualified health care professional about which medications are absolutely necessary and which can be reduced or eliminated.
- Showing one pill at a time, giving one or two word cues, and having a glass of something to drink at the ready might be all you need to decrease anxiety.

### Be together.

- Stay with the person when taking medications.
- Take your medications (or a small candy) with the person when they take theirs.

### Come back later.

- Try again in 15 minutes with a gentle voice and positive attitude.

### Don't force it.

- In many cases, a person has the right to refuse medication, even if they have dementia.
- Speak to a health care professional about your role to support medication management in accordance with the person's level of dementia.
- For example, hiding pills in food may work sometimes, but it is not appropriate to hide pills in the food of someone who is competent to refuse.
- If medication refusal is causing distress in the older person every day, it may be time to consider stopping that medication. Do not stop any medications until you have spoken to a qualified health care professional about this issue.



## Helpful Tips to Communicate with Health Care Professionals

When speaking with health care professionals about medications, it is important to be prepared so that they can provide the best support and recommendations.

For questions about medications, it is ideal to speak with the professional who has prescribed the medication (e.g. a doctor or a nurse practitioner). A pharmacist is also an excellent resource and you can often speak to them without an appointment. You can speak with pharmacists in person or over the phone.

The following are some helpful tips on how to communicate with health care professionals.

### Offer detail.

- The more detail you can provide about the type and dose of medications, the more a health care professional can help. Share details about all forms of medication being taken including prescriptions and over the counter medications.
- See [Tool 6.1: Medication Chart Template](#) for an example of how to get the important information about the medications on one page. Complete this chart or write a list and bring it to every appointment or encounter with any health care professional (e.g. visit to a walk-in clinic or emergency department). Remember to update the chart or list if there is a new prescription.

## Alternatives to Medications

**Alternative medicine** is a term that defines the use of non-mainstream approaches instead of traditional Western medicine.

**Complementary medicine** is a term that defines the use of non-mainstream approaches along with traditional Western medicine.

**Non-mainstream approach** is a term to describe many different approaches to health, healing and symptom management. These approaches can take many forms. Some examples include: yoga, deep breathing, meditation, massage, acupuncture, art and music therapy, and many more.

- Using alternative and complementary medicine approaches to improve health and wellness is very common. A health care professional is the best person to talk to about the use of some of these approaches. It is important that health care professionals know and understand how they can help while staying focused on the medications and altering the approach safely.

## Share any alternative or complementary approaches the person you care for is using and why.

- Beyond explaining who you are and the relationship you have with the person, offer details about your caregiving role, and the support you provide.

### Ask questions.

The following list highlights the five questions that you can ask a health care professional about the medications the person you care for is taking. These five questions can be asked during each visit to ensure the medications are up-to-date and reviewed regularly. It may be helpful for you to share the answers to these questions with the person you are supporting and caring for.

1. Changes. Have any medications been added, stopped or changed, and why?
2. Continuation. What medications does the person I am caring for need to keep taking and why?
3. Proper Use. How should the person I am caring for take the medications? How long should they take it for?
4. Monitor. How will I know if the medication is working? What side effects do I watch for?
5. Follow-Up? Does the person I am caring for need any tests (e.g. laboratory tests or blood tests)? When do we book the next visit?

See [Tool 6.2: Five Questions to Ask About Your Medications](#) for a copy of these questions. For more information on these questions, visit: [www.safemedicationuse.ca](http://www.safemedicationuse.ca).

Ask what support the community has to offer for medication management? Health care professionals should know about local geriatric teams and community programs that can help you managing medications. They should be able to tell you and the person you care for about these services and if they think a referral is needed.

Ask if there are alternatives to using some medications? Health care professionals know about alternatives to using medications. They may or may not recommend using alternatives but they can connect you with a different professional to help you.

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*“I have to manage all of my husband’s medications so the ‘five questions to ask about medications’ list is so helpful when I am speaking with our doctor!”*

– A caregiver from Orillia, ON

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## Finding Additional Support

How do I find additional support related to medication management?

### Ask a health care professional.

- Ask a qualified health care professional who can recommend appropriate local programs and services.

### Look online.

- You can search for online support by browsing the Healthline, health services for Ontario website at: [www.thehealthline.ca/](http://www.thehealthline.ca/).
- SafeMedicationUse.ca is supported by Health Canada. For more information on managing multiple medications, medication safety and other strategies for caregivers, visit: [www.safemedicationuse.ca](http://www.safemedicationuse.ca).

### Watch a video.

- To watch a fun and interesting short video about medication safety, watch “One Simple Solution for Medication Safety”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2KCWMnXSt8>.

## Summary

This chapter has provided you with some strategies to support medication management. Information provided includes how to manage medications safely, what to do if the person you care for says “no” to taking their medications, and tips on how to communicate with health care professionals. You can develop your own personalized strategies to manage medications and find the support you both need.

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It is important that you and/or the person you care for speak to a qualified health care professional before stopping any medications abruptly. Some medications require close monitoring by a health care professional before stopping, in order to prevent dangerous health outcomes.

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## Tool 6.1: Medication Chart Template<sup>14</sup>


Write down all the medications in one place to manage medications and to communicate with health care providers. Include all medications, prescribed and over the counter, that a person takes and bring it with you to each appointment or any other encounter with a health care professional (i.e. walk in clinic or emergency department visit).

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Name of Person: .....

Date (update with each new medication): .....

Name of medication	Strength of medication	How much to take (dose)	When to take	How to take	How long to take for	Notes <small>(reason, take with or without food, don't mix with alcohol, etc.)</small>
<i>e.g. Med1</i>	<i>xxxmg</i>	<i>1000mg (two tabs)</i>	<i>8:00am, and before bed</i>	<i>With a full glass of water</i>	<i>As needed for one month then follow up with Dr. Smith</i>	<i>To control knee pain</i>

[www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies](http://www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies)
Family Doctor or Nurse Practitioner: .....
Name of Pharmacy: .....


Telephone number: .....
Telephone number: .....

<sup>14</sup> Adapted from Caregivers Nova Scotia. (2019). *The Caregiver's Handbook*. Retrieved from: <https://caregiversns.org/resources/handbook>



## Tool 6.2: Five Questions to Ask About Your Medications<sup>15</sup>

# 5

## QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT YOUR MEDICATIONS

when you see your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

### 1. CHANGES?

Have any medications been added, stopped or changed, and why?

### 2. CONTINUE?

What medications do I need to keep taking, and why?

### 3. PROPER USE?

How do I take my medications, and for how long?

### 4. MONITOR?

How will I know if my medication is working, and what side effects do I watch for?

### 5. FOLLOW-UP?

Do I need any tests and when do I book my next visit?

**Keep your medication record up to date.**

**Remember to include:**

- drug allergies
- vitamins and minerals
- herbal/natural products
- all medications including non-prescription products

**Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist to review all your medications to see if any can be stopped or reduced.**

Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada  
Institut pour la sécurité des médicaments aux patients du Canada

Canadian Patient Safety Institute  
Institut canadien pour la sécurité des patients

**Visit [safemedicationuse.ca](http://safemedicationuse.ca) for more information.**

Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists

Société canadienne des pharmaciens d'hôpitaux

CANADIAN PHARMACISTS ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION DES PHARMACIENS DU CANADA

SafeMedicationUse.ca

PATIENT SAFETY COUNCIL OF CANADA  
CONSEIL DES PATIENTS CANADIEN

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<sup>15</sup> ISMP Canada. (2016). 5 questions to ask about your medications. Retrieved from: <https://www.ismp-canada.org/medrec/5questions.htm>

## References

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For more information on the Senior Friendly Caregiver Education Project and the Regional Geriatric Programs of Ontario, please visit [www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies](http://www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies).

