



Caregiver Bulletin

Managing Medications

THE FIVE RIGHTS to reduce medication errors – each time you help with medications, check the Five Rights:

1. **Right person** gets the medication.
2. **Right medication** is given.
3. **Right dose** is given.
4. **Right time** for this medication.
5. **Right route** to give the medication.



Did you know?

You play a crucial role in helping the person you care for be safe with their medications.

- Some medications can cause serious harm or death if not managed properly.
- Adverse drug events are one of the most common preventable errors in all care settings.
- Problems can happen when someone starts a new medication but keeps taking an old one.
- Over-the-counter medications and supplements can cause serious side-effects when taken with other medications.
- Nearly one-third of adults in the United States take five or more medications.
- In Washington state more than 90 percent of poisoning deaths are from a drug overdose. Call 9-1-1 if you have a poison emergency and the person has collapsed or is not breathing. If the person is awake and alert, call the Washington Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222.

What counts as a medication?

Prescription medications are ordered by a healthcare provider and filled at a pharmacy or by mail order. Over-the-counter medications are sold without a prescription such as aspirin, laxatives or cold medicines. Herbal medications include vitamins, dietary supplements and herbal teas sold at pharmacies, health food stores or botanicas.

Changes in behavior or prescription

- Communicate with all caregivers, healthcare providers, and delegating nurse about any side effects, missed medications or medication changes.
- Take notes if a medication makes the person feel different. Note when the change happened and how it made them feel. This will help the healthcare providers know if the medication needs a change.

Learn more

- [Washington State Department of Health Poisoning Data.](#)
- [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Medication Errors and Adverse Drug Events.](#)
- [Family Caregiver Alliance.](#)
- [National Council on Patient Information and Education, Be Med Wise.](#)

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Missed medications

Missed medications could have negative side effects. Some medications can be given late, others cannot.

- If a medication is missed call the healthcare provider, delegating nurse or pharmacy. Ask what to do, what symptoms to watch for and when to seek medical attention.
- If they approve a late dose, communicate with the other caregivers, adjust doses and times to match the healthcare provider's order, and document in the client's medical record.
- If a person you are caring for chooses to not take a medication, let their healthcare provider know and document in their medical record.
- Some healthcare providers write advance orders for what to do if a medication is missed.

What can you do to increase medication safety?

At the pharmacy

- Use one pharmacy. The pharmacist can check for medication duplications and interactions that could be missed using several pharmacies.
- Check medications every time you pick them up. Make sure the medication, dose and timing match what the healthcare provider prescribed.
- Mention any over the counter or herbal medications.
- Talk about any changes the medical provider might have made.
- Read the instructions including side effects. Should you give this medication with food or on an empty stomach? Ask if you have any questions.

At home

- Keep medications in the packaging they came in.
- Store in a secure location and according to the instructions. Some need to be refrigerated.
- Write the date opened on the medication label.
- Have a system for counting medications regularly to make sure they are not lost or stolen.
- Use a calendar to track medication refills, pick-ups and when they will run out or expire.
- Re-order medications at least one week in advance in case the pharmacy needs to contact the doctor.
- Do not use expired medication. [Follow safe disposal of expired medication.](#)
- Tell the prescribing medical professional about unused and expired medication. They might adjust dose or frequency.
- Residential agencies must follow nurse delegation rules. For people using this service, only trained caregivers can administer medications.

Giving medication

- Only trained caregivers should give medication.
- Slow down and focus. Never multi-task when giving medication.
- Document every time you give a medication.
- Be sure you give the right medication to the correct person.
- Check the medication name, dose, time to be given, route to be given, special instructions and expiration date.
- Do not crush or add medications to food or drinks without your healthcare provider or pharmacist's approval. The medication may not work correctly if altered.

Some prescription medications are given on a schedule. Others, known as PRNs, are given as needed. These can be prescribed for things like pain, illness or anxiety. All caregivers should understand the healthcare provider's or delegating nurse's instructions for when to give a PRN. Document if the medication was helpful or not.