

FAQS ON MEDICATION ADHERENCE

1. HOW YOU CAN HELP

Medication adherence simply means sticking to your prescription. Adhering to medication is taking the medication as directed by a health care professional – whether taken in pill form, inhaled, injected, or applied topically.

Not taking medication as prescribed is called non-adherence. Many people never fill their prescriptions, or they may never pick up their filled prescriptions from the pharmacy. Other people bring their medication home, but don't follow their health care professional's instructions – they skip doses or stop taking the medicine.

Specifically, non-adherence includes:

- Not filling a new prescription or refilling an existing prescription when you are supposed to;
- Stopping a medicine before the instructions say you should;
- Taking more or less of the prescribed medicine; and
- Taking the medicine at the wrong time.

2. WHY DON'T PEOPLE TAKE THEIR MEDICINES AS DIRECTED?

Taking medication correctly may seem like a simple or personal matter, but non-adherence is a complicated and common problem. Nearly three out of four Americans report that they do not always take their medicine as directed.¹ There are many reasons why people are not able to take their medicine as directed – including forgetfulness, lack of belief in the medicine's effectiveness, being unsure the medicine is working, fear of side effects, trouble taking the medicine (especially with injections or inhalers) and cost of medicines.

Often there is no single reason someone does not take their medicine as directed, but rather a combination of reasons. One person may face different barriers at different times as he or she manages his or her condition. Whatever the reason, the result is always the same –patients miss out on life-saving benefits, a better quality of life, and lose protection against future illness or serious health complications. For instance, not keeping blood pressure in check can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney failure; not keeping diabetes under control can lead to amputation, blindness, and heart disease.

3. WHAT IF THE COST OF MY MEDICINE IS A PROBLEM?

Cost of medicine and co-payments are common reasons that some patients do not take their medicine as directed. Consumers should check with their health plan providers about their prescription drug coverage, and make sure they are getting the most out of it. They should also check with their doctor or pharmacist about whether a medicine is available as a generic. Many pharmaceutical manufacturers have programs to help patients who need assistance paying for their prescription medicines.

Here are a few resources to assist with the cost of prescription drugs:

- [Benefits CheckUp: Prescription Drug Assistance](#)
National Council of Aging website that helps seniors with limited income and resources make the best decisions about the public and private programs that are available to help them save money on prescription drugs and other healthcare costs.
- [Patient Access Network](#)
Helps underinsured patients with co-payments for cancer or chronic disease medications.
- [Partnership for Prescription Assistance](#)
Programs around the country that help patients, caregivers and prescribers access free or low-cost prescription drugs.
- [Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs](#)
Consumers Union, the group that publishes Consumer Reports, picks the best drugs to treat certain conditions based on how well the drugs work, safety, side effects and cost. Also available in Spanish.
- [Medicare Extra Help](#)
Some people with limited resources and income also are eligible for Extra Help to pay for the costs - monthly premiums, annual deductibles, and prescription co-payments - related to a Medicare prescription drug plan.

4. WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT MEDICATION ADHERENCE?

Nearly half of Americans (133 million) are diagnosed with at least one long-term health condition, like asthma or diabetes.ⁱⁱ People with these common conditions take their medicine as directed only 50-60% of the time.^{iii iv} It is likely you or someone you know has one of these conditions and is struggling to take the medicine as directed—and this can have serious health consequences.

Approximately 125,000 people die each year in the United States because of not taking medicine as directed.^v About one third of medicine-related hospital admissions in the United States are linked to non-adherence. Not only does it cost patients their health, but it also costs the country nearly \$300 billion each year in additional costs for doctor visits, emergency room visits, hospital admissions and additional medicine.^{vi}

5. WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ON MEDICATION ADHERENCE?

Please visit the [Script Your Future Health Care Professional](#) website for more information about the importance of medication adherence and how you can learn more. Basic background pieces include:

- [World Health Organization \(WHO\) Report on Adherence](#)
- [National Council for Patient Information and Education \(NCPIE\) Medication Adherence National Action Plan](#)

6. WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TAKING AND USING MEDICINES SAFELY?

All medicines have risks and benefits. When a patient works with their health care professional to decide to use medicine to help manage a long-term health condition, he or she accepts certain risks in exchange for potential health benefits. Consumers can help manage those risks by using medicines safely, including storing and disposing of them safely.

Here are a few resources about safe medicine use :

- [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\) Safe Use Initiative](#)
- [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\) Medline Plus](#)

- [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality \(AHRQ\)](#)
- [FDA Information on Safe Disposal of Medicines](#)

7. WHAT CAN PATIENTS AND FAMILY CAREGIVERS DO IF THEY HAVE PROBLEMS WITH MEDICINE OR QUESTIONS ABOUT MEDICATION ADHERENCE?

If patients have any issues with their medicine that keep them from taking it as directed, they should start by talking to a doctor, pharmacist, nurse, nurse practitioner, or other health care professional to learn about options or tools that can help. They can also check ScriptYourFuture.org to find tools and resources to help.

ⁱ National Community Pharmacists Association and Pharmacists for the Protection of Patient Care Adherence Survey 2006.

ⁱⁱ American College of Physicians, “Costs and Quality Associated with Treating Medicare Patients with Multiple Chronic Conditions,” 18 May 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Sabate E., et. al., Adherence to Long-Term Therapies, World Health Organization (2003)

^{iv} US Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Chronic Disease Overview,” available at <http://www.cdc.gov/NCCd-php/overview.htm>

^v McCarthy R. The Price You Pay for the Drug Not Taken. *Business Health* 1998;16:27-33.

^{vi} R Balkrishnan, “The Importance of Medication Adherence in Improving Chronic Disease Related Outcomes,” *Med Care* 2005: 517-20.