

Improve Medication Adherence and Accuracy

Overview

Medication errors resulting in death have risen from 1,040 in 1983 to 8,634 in 2004.¹ Medication errors such as taking the wrong dose or at the wrong time of day are extremely common. Research has shown that patients with limited health literacy are less likely to know how to take their medicine (e.g., how to use an inhaler) and have more difficulty following complex medication regimens.² Helping patients understand medications and how to take them can reduce the number of medication errors. That knowledge can also help patients increase their ability to care for their illnesses, especially chronic illnesses.

Purpose

To outline some approaches practices can use to help patients manage their medication and improve medication adherence.

Action

Helping patients organize their medications provides an excellent opportunity to educate them on the medications and their purpose.

- **Ask patients how they remember to take their medicines.**
 - ◇ “Do you have a way to remember to take your medicines?”
 - ◇ “Everyone forgets to take their medicine from time to time. When was the last time you forgot to take any of your medicine?”

Tips ★

- When you prescribe medicine, write precise instructions for taking the medicine. For example, write, “Take 1 pill in the morning and 1 pill at bedtime.”
- When a patient switches from a brand name to a generic medicine, tell them that the color, shape, and size of the pill may change. If you are using visuals, make sure you show the correct pill.

- **Different methods of managing medications.**

The following methods of medication organization and management offer very different approaches. After talking with your patient, you can determine which level of assistance would be most beneficial.

- ◇ **MedCard** 

- ◆ Iowa Health Collaborative developed a “Know it, Show it, Tell it” program for medications. The Web site provides a printable two-sided form for listing medications and other health information that can be folded and carried in a wallet (also in Spanish). The site also has a poster for promoting it and specific instructions.


- ◇ **Pill Chart** 

- ◆ This pill chart is simple and easy to read, breaking the patient medicines down into only what they need to know like “Brand Name,” “Generic Name,” size (mg), and then the number of pills of each medicine they take at what times.

- ◇ **Pill Cards** 

- ◆ A pill card uses pictures and simple phrases to show each medicine, its purpose, how much to take, and when to take it. Patients or family members can also use the template to make their own pill cards.


- ◇ **Pill Boxes**

- ◆ **Obtaining pill boxes:** Pill boxes are easily accessible on the Internet, fairly inexpensive, and can be customized with a sticker with your practice’s logo and phone number.
- ◆ **Filling pill boxes:** Introducing patients to pill boxes and teaching them how to fill their own boxes can be invaluable for some patients and a strategy they use for many years. Show patients, and then use [Tool 5: The Teach-Back Method](#)  to assure they understand. Encourage patients to bring their pill boxes as well as their pill bottles, and refresh the teaching when new medications are added.
- ◆ **Family members:** Sometimes family members are capable of filling and monitoring the pill boxes. Encourage your patients to bring family members to appointments.
- ◆ **Home health agencies:** Ask local home health agencies what services they may have for filling pill boxes on a regular basis.

Testimonial 

“I was really drawn to the MedCard in Tool 16 and implemented this in the clinic on a small scale. Although I quickly realized that it took the staff a lot of time to fill out the information, I was struck by how much the patients appreciated it when we handed it to them. What I realized is that our Electronic Medical Record could be set up to supply the same information in a fairly efficient way, so I set forth to make a few changes so we could offer this information to our patients and easily keep our records and theirs updated.”

-family medicine practice

- **Find time to help patients manage their medicines.** Some of these options take a lot of time for the staff to do. Here are some suggestions to help with that.
 - ◆ **Volunteer:** Have a volunteer fill out MedCards, pill charts, or pill cards prior to or after the visit, and mail them to the patient.
 - ◆ **Electronic medical record:** Look at your current electronic medical record system and see if it can be adapted to create a medicine list that would be easily read and understood by patients.
 - ◆ **Family member or case manager:** Pass the task on to a family member or case manager and verify its accuracy when they bring it to their next appointment.
- **Advertise the service.** Display this [Medication Aid Poster](#)  that outlines the different options to help introduce patients to the service.
- **Record in chart.** Note in patients’ charts what method they use to remember how to take their medicine.

Track Your Progress

- At the end of the first week, identify the percentage of patients who take medicine that had a reminder strategy noted in their chart. Check again in 2, 6, and 12 months. Aim to have notes on reminder strategies for 90 percent of patients within 12 months.

Reference

1. Phillips, DP. A steep increase in domestic fatal medication errors with use of alcohol and/or street drugs. Arch Intern Med 2008;168(14):1561-6.
2. Berkman ND, DeWalt DA, Pignone MP, et al. Literacy and Health Outcomes. Evidence Report/Technology Assessment No. 87 (Prepared by RTI International-University of North Carolina Evidenced-based Practice Center under Contract No. 290-02-0016). AHRQ Publication No. 04-E007-2. Rockville, MD: Agency of Healthcare Research and Quality. January 2004.