



Managing Multiple Medications

by Lori Hartwell



I have taken enough pills in my lifetime to choke several horses! (I am sure you have taken your fair share, too.) At this point, I believe that my 42

years of pill taking have qualified me for a PhD in pillology, so I thought I would share a few tips that I have learned along the way. There are a lot of issues that I could cover, but for now I will limit my comments to two general categories—medication safety and medication adherence.

It is always important to check your medications when you get them to make sure the pharmacy didn't inadvertently give you the wrong prescription. This has happened to me on more than one occasion and is a definite safety and health concern.

Once you have the right medications, you need to decide where to store them. The bedroom (not the bathroom medicine cabinet) is one of the best places to keep medications because it is likely that the temperature and humidity will be more constant. Changes in temperature, humidity, and exposure to light can sometimes cause medications to become ineffective or dangerous.

When deciding where to store your medications, you also want to make sure to consider the safety of others in your household. If you have children or pets, make sure that the medications are out of their reach (remember that for children the definition of "out of reach" changes with age). If you have houseguests, you may want to consider whether you should temporarily put your medications in a different location.

Adherence to the prescribed medication schedule is also vitally important. Taking the right medication at the right time at the right dose is

an acquired skill. Adherence ensures transplant and dialysis success!

Right now, I have 14 bottles of medications on my bedroom dresser (I obviously have no children or pets that can reach them). For me, having the meds visible reminds me to take them. To help me organize my prescription bottles, I label the top of my medications with colored happy face stickers. For example, I use green for morning, yellow for lunch, and red for nighttime. I use an additional orange sticker to identify blood pressure medications, and a purple sticker to identify "as needed" medications.

It is vital to know the correct time to take each medication, and each medication can be different. For example, phosphate binders need to be taken with meals and snacks. If a medication makes you sleepy, ask your doctor if it is possible to take it at bedtime. Some meds may also need to be taken on an empty stomach. Transplant meds must be taken at the same time each day to maintain constant levels in the bloodstream. Oftentimes the directions on prescriptions are not very clear. For example, the label



may simply state "take twice a day" without providing guidance about the best time of day. If you have questions about when to take your medications, you should check with

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your doctor.

I take most of my meds either in the morning when I get up or at bedtime, so I have not found a need to set an alarm for those times. I do set my phone with an alarm to remind me when to take my lunchtime medications. It may be a good idea for you to set an alarm for all medication times if you are new to the whole pill popping game. Taking phosphate binders with every meal can also be a challenge, but I have found that the key is to have them everywhere—I have them on the dining room table, in my purse, and on my desk.

Learning to order medications properly is another necessary skill. Often medications have different refill dates, so you may feel like you are continuously ordering prescription refills.

Consider the following when managing your refills. For each medication, you should ask yourself questions such as: How many refills do I have left? Do I need to get any blood tests before ordering my refill? Do I need to talk things over with my healthcare team before ordering refills? How long does it take to get my medication?

For example, my insurance company requires me to get many of my medications by mail order, which can take up to 10 days. Be on the ball to make sure you aren't paying

HOPEline

If you have chronic kidney disease
and don't know what to expect call

Si tiene enfermedad renal crónica
y no sabe que le espera

English
1-800-579-1970

Español
1-800-780-4238

Support from someone
who's been there.

Monday-Friday 10am-8pm (PST)



alguien que ya estuvo ahí
le ofrece su apoyo.

Lunes-Viernes 10am-8pm (hora del Pacífico)

overnight shipping fees.

When calling in a mail order refill and dealing with the frustration of an automated system you may need to play soft music and have a puppy on your lap to pet and calm your nerves. On many occasions I have found myself yelling “operator” like a mad woman in the receiver, hoping that their voice recognition system would understand my words, only to be prompted back to the very beginning. I have learned that, for the mail order house I use, using the term “representative” instead of “operator” is the key to talking to a human being. Although mail order pharmacies are a reality for many of us, I like going to the corner drug store whenever possible. Besides being easier, you can have face-to-face contact with an actual pharmacist, and you can check your meds on the spot.

I always keep a medication list in my wallet and in my Smart Phone. It is not only impossible to remember all the names, times and doses, but I also impress healthcare professionals when I whip out the list. I also have given this list to my family in case of an emergency. A great website called MyMedSchedule.com has helped me create, update and print my list of meds—it also provides some pictures of the medications.

Finally, if you have any questions about your medications at any time, don't be shy about asking your doctor. There are undoubtedly many more tips that I could provide on medication safety and adherence, but my time has run short—I need to go take my meds!

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