



Tips for Safely Assisting with Medication Usage



Many staff and family members are called upon to assist people with taking their medications. Here are some important safety tips. Always refer to the policies and guidelines of your agency and state.

The Seven "Rights" of Medication Administration

States teach different numbers of "rights." Always refer to the policies and guidelines of your agency and state.

Right Person - Match the person's name on the label of the medication package and the medication record along with a photograph or other identifier to ensure that the right person is receiving the right medication.

Right Medication - Match the medication label with what is listed on the medication record to ensure that the proper medication is used.

Right Dose - Match the dose and/or strength on the label with the medication record to ensure that the right amount of medication is given.

Right Time - Give the medication at the right time that it is prescribed, usually within 30 minutes to 1 hour before or after the prescribed time.

Right Route - Make sure the route is correct. Examples include oral (by mouth), topical (on the skin), inhaled (in a mist or other inhaled form), or other route as defined on the medication record and label.

Right Form - Make sure the medication is in the correct form, such as liquid, tablet, capsule, cream, or drop.

Right Record - Complete the documentation in the correct person's record after the medication is taken.

Documentation

Make sure to document that the person received or did not receive their medication in the correct record and, if they did not receive it, the reason. It is an error with significant consequences if it is done incorrectly. Make sure to consult the policies and guidelines of your agency and state.

Medication errors

Medication errors do occur, but every measure should be taken to prevent them. Examples include the incorrect person, dose, route, time, quantity, or improper documentation. Using your agency's policies and procedures, always notify the appropriate nurse or staff as soon as possible after the error occurs.

Controlled substances

Assisting with controlled substance use requires additional steps. These may include double-locked areas for storage and additional sign-out procedures and documentation. They also may include a two (2) person count between shifts or when medication keys change hands. Be sure to follow the guidelines required by your agency to meet state regulations.

Monitor for coughing or aspiration signs

If a person coughs repeatedly or appears to have trouble breathing or swallowing after taking their medication, it could mean that they are aspirating material into their lungs. Notify your nurse immediately if you observe these warning signs.

Thickening of liquid medications

If a person is on a special diet that requires thickening of liquids or modification of the size of food particles, be sure to thicken liquids used to administer medication to the same consistency as what is ordered. Pills should also be no larger than the size their diet order recommends. Before breaking or crushing any medication, ensure that it is approved and ordered by the prescriber. You may also consult the nurse or pharmacist for additional help.

Allergic reactions

If you note hives, wheezing, shortness of breath, swelling, or any concerning symptoms after a medication is given, these could be signs of a life-threatening allergic reaction. Call 911 and notify the nurse. If you notice a rash or itching develops, especially after starting a new medication, inform your nurse immediately.

Side effects

Many medications have side effects such as nausea, sedation (sleepiness), jitteriness, tiredness, etc. If you notice any changes in a person's behavior or level of alertness after giving a medication, especially after starting a new medication or changing the dose of a current medication, this may indicate that side effects are occurring. The nurse should be notified. Pay particular attention during the first two weeks after a new medication is started or after a change in dose of a current medication.

Considerations for people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

- Take time to provide education to the person about their medications, teaching information about the names of medications, uses, when they should be taken, side effects to watch out for, and any special instructions
- Supporters should encourage the practice of taking all medication bottles to doctors' appointments to help ensure medications are taken as directed
- Be aware that medication side effects may be communicated differently in people with IDD. If a person learns that every time they take a medication, they experience a negative effect, they may begin to exhibit adverse behaviors to communicate this issue. For example:
 - Refusing medication
 - Becoming agitated or aggressive around medication times
 - Striking out at the person assisting with medications
 - Spitting out medications
 - Resisting because of the taste or smell
 - Refusing to come to the medication area
 - Turning their head when receiving medications
 - Pocketing or "cheeking" their medications
 - For people who are more independent with taking their medications, they may have extra medication leftover or may be late to refill prescriptions which may indicate they are not taking them as directed

Medications have many useful benefits. It is vital to ensure that they are used safely and to monitor for any adverse effects to help people receive the most benefit with the least risk.