

# Sticking With the Program



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## Medications for COPD work best when taken as directed

BY ROSALEE L. BLUMER

This problem is compounded for people with other health problems in addition to COPD because they often must take a combination of inhaled drugs and oral medications.

### Some Practical Suggestions

While pill boxes labeled with the days of the week may serve as handy reminders for oral medications, they obviously can't be used for inhaled medications, notes Ms. Garrett-Szymanski. "One of the best things to do is to try and make taking your medication part of your daily routine," she suggests. For instance, since the mouth should be rinsed after using most inhalers, she recommends using an inhaler right before the tooth-brushing ritual, which most people remember to do twice a day.

Another problem with inhalers is that some lack dose counters, making it impossible to determine how much medication is left and when it's time for a refill. Ms. Garrett-Szymanski has the following advice: "For each inhaled medication, look on the box to see how many puffs are in the canister and keep track of how many puffs you take," she advises. For example, a medication that is prescribed for two puffs twice a day (four doses a day) for 30 days would equal 120 puffs per month. This is a good way to keep track of maintenance medications for COPD.

"However, this method will probably be less useful for keeping track of rescue medications," says Ms. Garrett-Szymanski, "because these medications may be used more frequently than originally planned and could run out. That is

**D**id you remember to take your medicine today? If you didn't, you're not alone. Failure to take medicine as prescribed—a problem termed *noncompliance* or *nonadherence*—affects people of all age groups and medical conditions. For people with health problems like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), failing to take medications regularly and correctly means they are not doing everything possible to treat their condition.

"Nonadherence in the general population is a big problem," says Kathy Garrett-Szymanski, RRT, a respiratory therapist and Asthma Center Administrator at Long Island College in Brooklyn, New York. "However, following a regular medication schedule is often more complicated for people with respiratory conditions." One reason, she explains, is the lack of consistency among the many devices used to deliver respiratory drugs.

Having to take a medication several times a day also contributes to the problem. The more frequently a medication must be taken each day, the more likely a dose may be forgotten.

why it's better to err on the side of caution and overestimate the amount you will take."

### Beyond Simple Reminders

While practical advice might be somewhat beneficial in helping a person stick to a medication regimen, it addresses only part of the problem. "For most people, the biggest problem is not forgetting to take medication," Ms. Garrett-Szymanski comments, "but being motivated enough to take it." People have to give careful thought to the real reasons why they fail to take their medications. Recognizing what these rea-



sons are usually helps people overcome them, she adds. Here are some of the most common barriers:

#### **Lack of understanding about the illness, medication, or device**

"If people don't understand why they are taking a particular medication or what it's supposed to do, they may not be very motivated to take it," says Ms. Garrett-Szymanski. This makes forgetting to take medication more likely. "Learning as much as possible about the illness, the medication, and how to properly take it may increase motivation," she suggests. "People can go to the library or on the Internet and find a lot of useful materials but when it comes to their individual condition, the most relevant information will most likely come from a health care provider."

People who receive a prescription for a new inhaled medication should ask their clinician to carefully explain and demonstrate its use. If a person is unsure about how to take a new medication or about taking a usual medication properly, Ms. Garrett-Szymanski recommends bringing the inhaler to the office and having the

clinician observe the process. "That's really the only way to be completely sure," she adds.

#### **Lack of a good relationship with the clinician**

A person's ability to understand his or her illness, why a medication is being taken, or how to properly take it depends upon the patient-clinician relationship. "A good personal relationship with your health care provider is probably the most important part of following any treatment program," Ms. Garrett-Szymanski remarks.

"Your clinician should be someone whom you trust and of whom you feel comfortable asking questions," Ms. Garrett-Szymanski explains. Many people feel too embarrassed or intimidated to ask questions for fear of sounding foolish or taking up too much of the clinician's time. "If there is something you don't understand, you should continue asking until you receive a satisfactory answer," she stresses. If the clinician does

### **Questions To Ask When You Receive a New Prescription (or Need Information About an Old One)**

- What is the name of this drug and what is it designed to do? Is this a generic or a name-brand product?
- What is the dosing schedule and how do I take it?
- What should I do if I forget a dose?
- What side effects should I expect? What should I do if I experience these side effects?
- How long will I be on this drug?
- How should I store this drug?
- Should I take this on an empty stomach or with food? Is it safe to drink alcohol with this drug?

Source: [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)



## Patient Assistance Programs

### The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) offers

a directory of pharmaceutical company patient assistance programs.

(800) 762-4636

[www.pparx.org](http://www.pparx.org)

Additional information regarding patient assistance programs can be found at:

[www.needymeds.com](http://www.needymeds.com)

[www.rxassist.org](http://www.rxassist.org)

[www.rxhope.com](http://www.rxhope.com)

[www.pfizerhelpfulanswers.com](http://www.pfizerhelpfulanswers.com)

not have the time for all of your questions, someone on staff, such as a nurse or respiratory therapist, should be designated to do so. (See sidebar.)

### Denial, or “I feel good today so I don’t need to take my medication”

“Some people with chronic conditions such as COPD don’t want to admit to themselves that they have an illness that requires daily medication,” says Ms. Garrett-Szymanski. This is especially true for those in the early stages of COPD, when symptoms may be mild. For some, taking their medications would be admitting that they have a problem or regard themselves as “sick.”

“The obvious solution is to face the facts and accept that you have a chronic, yet treatable, condition,” says Ms. Garrett-Szymanski, “and to real-

ize that the best way to manage your condition involves following your medication schedule correctly.” In addition, joining a support group for people with COPD or seeking help from a psychologist or counselor who specializes in treating people with chronic illnesses may help people with COPD better accept their condition.

On the other hand, people sometimes think that if they’re feeling okay, they can cut down the dose and/or frequency of their medication or stop it altogether. This is another way of refusing to accept the reality of a chronic condition. “The irony here,” says Ms. Garrett-Szymanski, “is that often the reason a person starts to feel better is *because* he or she has been taking medication.”

### High drug costs

For some people, cost is one of the biggest factors involved when it comes to taking—or not taking—a prescribed medication. Many simply cannot afford their prescriptions. While there’s no question that drugs can be expensive, some pharmaceutical companies offer free or discounted medicines for people in financial need; some of these programs are geared toward seniors (see sidebar, Patient Assistance Programs). Many people fail to take advantage of these programs because they simply do not know they exist. Changes to the Medicare Modernization Act may help some patients pay for their prescription medications. For information about the Act and how it may affect you, go to [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov)

### Failure to experience immediate results/relief

If someone takes aspirin for a headache and the pain goes away within an hour, the person will be motivated to take an aspirin the next time a headache occurs. For those with conditions like COPD, however, the effects of medication are not necessarily immediate. “It is important to understand your illness and how your medications work,” Ms. Garrett-Szymanski says. ❧

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