

The safe and effective use of medicines (medicines optimisation)

Information for the public

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About this information

NICE guidelines provide advice on the care and support that should be offered to people who use health and care services.

This information explains the advice about the safe and effective use of medicines (medicines optimisation) that is set out in NICE guideline 5.

Does this information apply to me?

Yes, if you are taking or using 1 or more medicines.

In this information 'medicines' refers to all healthcare treatments, including prescribed treatments and over-the-counter medicines.

Safe and effective use of medicines

Most people take medicines at some point in their life. Medicines are beneficial but people don't always get the best from them. This may be because the medicines are not taken as intended, or they are taking medicines they no longer need. Mistakes are sometimes made when medicines are used. For example, medicines could be prescribed at the wrong dose, they may be prescribed when they are not needed, they may interfere with medicines already been taken, or the patient may make mistakes when taking them. Sometimes medicines are not prescribed when they should be.

Involving people in decisions about their medicines is an important principle. It also means that medicines are more likely to be taken and used properly. Good communication (with patients and carers, and between health and social care practitioners) and good practices when prescribing and managing medicines can help patients to have a more active role in managing their medicines. It can also help to reduce problems and mistakes.

Your health and social care team

A range of professionals who specialise in different areas of treatment or support may be involved in prescribing and managing your medicines. These could include doctors (including GPs), nurses, pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and specialists. All of these professionals will have the relevant knowledge and skills to help you with your medicines. Social care practitioners may also be involved in your care.

Working with you

Your care team should talk with you about getting the most from your medicines. They should explain any support you should be offered so that you can decide together what is best for you. Your family or carer can be involved in helping you to make decisions, but only if you agree. If you are a child or young person, your parent or carer may be involved in helping to make decisions, depending on your capacity to make decisions. There is a [list of questions](#) you can use to help you talk with your care team.

You may also like to read NICE's information for the public on [patient experience in adult NHS services](#) or [service user experience in adult mental health](#). These set out what adults should expect when they use the NHS. We also have more information on the NICE website about [using health and social care services](#).

Making decisions about your medicines

You should have the opportunity to be involved in making decisions about your medicines if this is what you would like. Your health professional should discuss with you the different treatment options, how the medicines are likely to help you, and any side effects you may expect. They should use the best available evidence when discussing medicines with you. They should also ask you what is important to you about managing your condition and your medicines and take into account your values and preferences when making a decision about your treatment with you.

Your health professional may suggest using a 'patient decision aid' with you (or your family members or carers), if one exists for your treatment and they think it would help you. A patient decision aid is a tool that can be used during an appointment with your health professional to help you weigh up the risks and benefits of treatments depending on your health, lifestyle and preferences. Health professionals should always discuss treatments with you and should not suggest that the decision aid is used instead of a discussion.

You may need to have more than 1 appointment to help you make a decision about your medicines. You should be able to talk about your decision again and be able to change your mind, particularly if your health or circumstances change.

Accurately listing your medicines

It is important that health professionals have an up-to-date list of all the medicines you are taking. This is particularly important if you go into hospital, if you are in hospital and you move from 1 ward to another or to a different hospital, and when you are discharged from hospital. Making sure that your current prescription reflects what medicines you are taking is called medicines reconciliation and it is usually done by a pharmacist, pharmacy technician, doctor or nurse.

If you are transferred from 1 place of care to another, checking and listing your medicines should be done within 24 hours of your transfer (or sooner if necessary). If you are in hospital, it may need to be done more than once – for example, if you are transferred to a different ward, and when you are discharged. If you have been in hospital, your GP practice should check and update your list of medicines as soon as possible. This should be before you are given your next prescription or new supply of medicines, and no more than 1 week after the practice receives information about your discharge. If you agree, the

list of medicines you are taking may be sent to a pharmacy of your choice.

You should be involved in the medicines reconciliation process, when appropriate and whenever possible. If you agree, or if there is some reason you can't be involved in this, your family or carers should be involved.

Sharing information about your medicines

If you are transferred from 1 place to another – for example, from 1 hospital ward to another, or into the community if you have been in hospital – it is important that relevant information about your medicines, and a list of medicines you are taking, is discussed and shared with you or members of your family or carers. Relevant information about you and your medicines should also be shared between health and social care practitioners involved in your care (see box 1). This is so that everyone involved in your care has the information they need to help prevent mistakes with your medicines wherever possible. The information should be shared safely and accurately, ideally within 24 hours of your transfer, and health and social care practitioners should respect your confidentiality. You (or your family or carers) should be given a complete and accurate list of your current medicines in a format that suits you. The list should include any changes to your medicines – for example, changes made during your stay in hospital.

Box 1 Information shared when you are transferred to a different place

- Your contact details
- Your GP's contact details
- Details of other relevant contacts you or members of your family or your carers have identified (for example, your nominated community pharmacy –the pharmacy that is most suitable for you)
- Information about allergies you have to medicines or their ingredients or reasons why you haven't been able to take specific medicines in the past
- Details of the medicines you are taking at the moment, including the dose, how they are taken and what they are taken for
- Changes to your medicines, including medicines started or stopped, or dosage changes, and reason for the change
- Date and time of the last dose – for example, for medicines that are taken once a week or once a month, including any injections or patches you have
- What information you (or your family members or carers) have been given
- Other information, including when your medicines should be reviewed or monitored, and what support you may need to carry on taking the medicines.

NICE has produced guidance on drug allergy. See [other NICE guidance](#) for more information.

Reviewing your medicines

If you are taking several medicines, or you have a long-term condition, or you are an older person, a health professional – for example, your GP, practice nurse or a pharmacist – may arrange a meeting with you to discuss whether you are getting the best from your medicines. This is called a medication review. Your family members or your carer may be involved in this meeting if it is appropriate.

At this meeting your health professional should:

- check all the medicines you are taking and check what they are for (including those you don't need a prescription for, such as some painkillers, and complementary medicines such as herbal medicines)
- check that you understand why you are taking your medicines
- find out how you feel about taking your medicines
- check that you still need all the medicines you are taking
- ask whether you are having problems with any of your medicines
- ask whether you have had or currently have any risk factors for developing a side effect from your medicines
- check whether you should have tests to find out how well the medicines are working or if they are causing any side effects.

Managing your medicines

If you have been in hospital and are taking several medicines, or you have a long-term condition, or you are an older person, you may be able to have extra support with your medicines after you leave hospital. The support could include advice from a pharmacist, telephone support, or home visits from your GP or a nurse.

Using a self-management plan

If you have a long-term condition and you want to be involved in managing your medicines yourself, your health professional may discuss with you the benefits of using a self-management plan. A self-management plan may include:

- the plan's start and review dates
- the condition(s) that you have
- details of medicines being taken (such as the maximum strength or dose that can be taken, what time of day to take them and how many times a day, and how long they can be taken for)

- information about allergies you have to medicines or their ingredients or reasons why you haven't been able to take specific medicines in the past
- what to do if you think you have had a reaction to a medicine, including who you tell about this and what information you should give
- when to ask a health professional for advice
- what is expected of you and what is expected of your health professional
- any other instructions you may need to take your medicines safely and in the right way.

Your health professional should discuss with you how to use the plan, and the benefits and risks of using it. They should also discuss with you your values and preferences and any support you may need, and record the discussion in your medical notes or care plan. The plan should be provided in a format that is suitable for you, and it should be reviewed regularly to check that you aren't having any problems using it.

Mistakes with medicines

Sometimes mistakes are made with medicines which may cause harm. An example of this is being given the wrong medicine. Patients can also make mistakes with their medicines, for example because they have misunderstood an instruction.

Organisations have processes in place to try to make sure that mistakes don't happen. However, if they do, health and social care practitioners should identify and report any mistakes with medicines as soon as possible. To help find out when mistakes happen, patient surveys may be carried out, and health professionals may review your medical records and watch other staff administering your medicines in hospital, for example. Health and social care practitioners should make sure that you or your family or carers know how to identify mistakes with your medicines, who you should tell about them and how you go about doing this. Reporting mistakes helps to ensure that they are less likely to happen again in the future.

Questions to ask about the safe and effective use of medicines

These questions may help you discuss your condition or the treatments you have been offered with your care team:

- How often should my medicines be reviewed?
- Who sees the information about what medicines I'm taking?
- Will the information about my medicines be kept confidential?
- What are the benefits of using a self-management plan?
- Can you tell me more about using a patient decision aid?
- How do I report a side effect or a bad reaction to a medicine?
- What do I do if I think I no longer need a medicine?
- What do I do if I think a medicine isn't working?
- Who do I speak to if I want to stop taking a medicine?
- What do I do if I think a mistake has been made with my medicines?

Sources of advice and support

You can go to [NHS Choices](#) for more information.

NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by this organisation.

Other NICE guidance

- [Drug allergy](#) (2014) NICE guideline CG183

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