

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Prescription-only medicines (POMs) can only be prescribed by a doctor, dentist, specially qualified nurse-prescriber, or a prescribing pharmacist. Such drugs are not necessarily “stronger” or more likely to have side effects than those you can buy without prescription. Indeed, you may be given a POM that is also available over the counter. Drugs that are available only on prescription are drugs whose safe use is difficult to ensure without medical supervision.

When you are prescribed a drug, it is usually started at the normal dosage for the disorder being treated. The dosage may later be adjusted (lowered or increased) if the drug is not producing the desired effect or if there are adverse effects, or it may even be switched to an alternative drug that may be more effective.

Prescribing generic and brand-name drugs

When writing a prescription for a drug, the prescriber often has a choice between a generic and a brand-name product. Although the active ingredient is the same, two versions of the same drug may act in slightly different ways, as each manufacturer may formulate their product differently. They may also look different. In most cases, the differences are not important for the clinical effect of the drug. Generic drugs are often cheaper than brand-name products, and their use therefore provides a substantial cost-saving to the NHS.

Community pharmacists are obliged to dispense precisely what the doctor has written on the prescription form and are not allowed to substitute a generic drug when a brand-name has been specified. However, if you are prescribed a generic drug, the pharmacist is free

to dispense whatever version of this drug is available. This means that your regular medication may vary in appearance each time you renew your prescription.

Hospital pharmacies often dispense generic versions of certain drugs. Therefore, if you are in hospital, the regular medication you receive may look different from that which you are used to at home.

Your prescription

It is advisable for you to obtain all of your prescription drugs from the same pharmacist or at least from the same pharmacy, so that your pharmacist can advise you about any particular problems you may have, and keep supplies of any unusual drugs you may be taking.

If you need to take drugs that are prescribed by more than one doctor, or by your dentist in addition to your doctor, the pharmacist is able to call attention to possible harmful interactions. Doctors do ask if you are taking other medicines, but your regular pharmacist provides valuable additional advice.

Questioning your prescriber

Lack of information is the most common reason for drug failure. Comments like “The doctor is too busy to be bothered with a lot of questions” or “The doctor will think I’m stupid if I ask that” are common. Be certain you understand the instructions for a drug before you take it, and don’t hesitate to ask if you have any questions about your drug treatment.

It is a good idea to make a list of the questions you may want to ask before your visit, and to make a few notes while you are there about what you are told. It is not uncommon to forget some of the

instructions your prescriber gives you during a consultation.

Know what you are taking

Your prescriber should tell you the generic or brand name of the drug he or she is prescribing, and exactly what condition or symptom it has been prescribed for.

As well as telling you the name of the drug prescribed, your prescriber should explain what dose you should take, how often to take it, and whether the prescription should be repeated. Be certain you understand the instructions about how and when to take the drug (see also Taking your medication, facing page). For example, does four times a day mean four times during the time you are awake, or four times in 24 hours? Ask your prescriber how long the treatment should last; some medications cause harmful effects if you stop taking them abruptly, or do not have beneficial effects unless the course of drug treatment is completed.

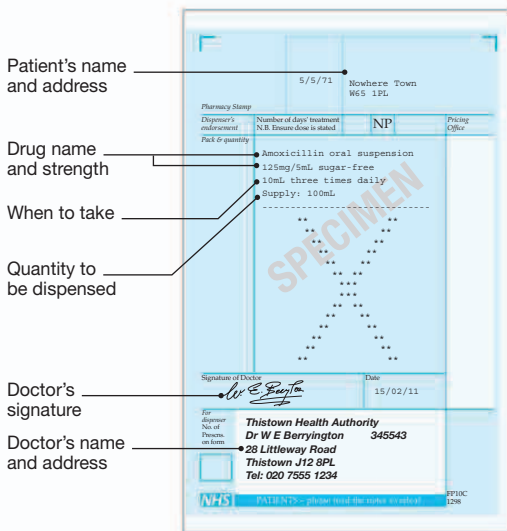
To help you remember, the label on your dispensed medicine may repeat the instructions, and the pharmacist will give you a patient information leaflet that will give you detailed information about the drug. You should make sure you read this leaflet before taking your medication.

Risks and special precautions

All drugs have adverse effects (see The effects of drugs, p.15), and you should know what these are. Ask your prescriber what the possible adverse effects of the drug are and what you should do if they occur. Also ask if there are any foods, activities (such as driving), or other drugs you should avoid during treatment, and whether it is safe to drink alcohol while taking the drug.

Your prescription

Your prescription tells the pharmacist what to supply and what to put on the label. If the prescription and label differ, ask the pharmacist about it. The label may have a “do not use after” date. If it does not, ask the pharmacist to advise you. Usually, you will receive a Patient Information Leaflet, which gives details about the drug, its adverse effects, whether it is safe for you, when not to use it, and so on. Compare this with your doctor’s instructions, and ask the pharmacist about any differences.



PRESCRIPTION TERMS

- ac** before food
- ad lib** freely
- AM** morning
- bd** twice a day
- c** with
- cap** capsule
- cc** cubic centimetre
- ext** for external use
- gtt** drops
- mcg** micrograms
- mg** milligrams
- ml** millilitres
- nocte** at night
- od** each day
- om** each morning
- on** each night
- pc** after food
- PM** evening
- po** by mouth
- pr** by rectum
- pn** as needed
- pv** by vagina
- qds** four times a day
- s** without
- sr** slow release
- stat** at once
- tab** tablet
- tds** three times a day
- top** apply topically
- ud** use as directed
- x** times