

MedicinesTalk

Information for consumers and consumer groups about using medicines wisely

Summer 2007
No. 24

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Are the pills too much to swallow?

Most medicines come in the form of tablets or capsules. But what do you do if you or someone you are looking after can't swallow ordinary tablets and capsules or finds it difficult to do so? Read on, and we'll give you some hints.

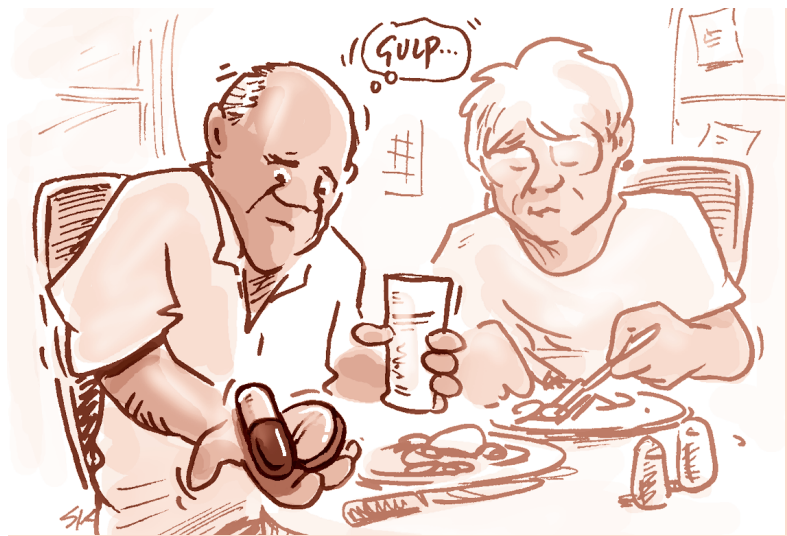
First, tell your doctor about the problem, so they can take it into consideration when choosing medicines for you or your relative.

However, don't forget your pharmacist. They have a wealth of knowledge about the different forms of medicines, as well as which tablets can and can't be crushed, which capsules can and can't be opened, and what precautions should be taken when doing so.

Is there another form of the medicine?

If you or your relative is having difficulty taking the tablet or capsule form of a medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist if there is another form that might be more suitable.

Many medicines are available in liquid form, and some tablets and granules can be dissolved in water. Sometimes, a pharmacist can make a liquid form of the medicine for you.



Some medicines come in forms that don't need swallowing. For example, they may come as

- patches that stick to the skin
- drops or tablets placed under the tongue
- drops placed on the inside of the cheek
- suppositories (that go into the anus)
- nasal sprays
- injections.

Is there another medicine in a suitable form?

If no suitable form of the medicine exists, ask your doctor or pharmacist if there is another medicine that [cont >](#)

comes in a suitable form. This may be preferable to breaking or crushing tablets or opening capsules.

Can I break up the tablets or open the capsules?

If a suitable alternative does not exist, it may be possible to cut up or crush the tablet, or open the capsule. However, this should be done only after obtaining advice from a pharmacist.

Some tablets or capsules should not be broken, crushed or opened, because they will not work properly, or they will become unsafe or unpalatable. For example,

- slow release tablets and capsules (their long-lasting effects will be destroyed and you may get too much initially)
- enteric-coated tablets or capsules with enteric-coated granules (these have a special coating to protect the lining of the stomach)
- tablets that have a coating to protect them from air or sunlight
- tablets that have a coating to hide their horrible taste.

Some tablets and capsules will not work properly if they are crushed or opened.

Crushing tablets and opening capsules

Below is some general advice for breaking, crushing and opening tablets and capsules. However, before going ahead, ask your pharmacist if it is OK to do so, and whether there are any special precautions that should be taken. For example, can the medicine be mixed with liquids other

than water, or are there any foods with which the medicine should not be mixed?

Sometimes, simply breaking a tablet in two means that it can be swallowed more easily. Usually, tablets can be broken along the score line (indented line across the middle of the tablet) by hand or with a knife. However, using a special tablet cutter can make the task easier. Cutters can be bought relatively cheaply from pharmacies.

Tablets are best crushed in a special tablet crusher, because it produces a finer powder. Alternatively, use a mortar and pestle, small bowl or two large metal spoons. Dissolve the powder in water or food.

Capsules can be opened and their contents mixed with water or food.

Make sure that you or your relative gets the full dose of the medicine by

- ensuring that none of the medicine is lost when breaking or opening the tablets or capsules
- mixing the medicine with only a small amount of liquid or food (if allowed)
- ensuring that all the mixture is eaten or drunk.

Watch for changes

Sometimes, breaking or crushing tablets, opening capsules, or using a different form of the medicine alters the way the medicine works. This may result in the medicine working slightly more or less effectively, or causing different side effects. Therefore, for the first few weeks, you should watch out for any new side effects or changes in your or your relative's health. ■

Going away? Keep your medicines cool

Keeping medicines cool and away from sunlight is important when travelling. Heat and sunlight can make medicines deteriorate. This can result in them not working properly, or losing their effectiveness well before the expiry date.

Keep cool and away from light

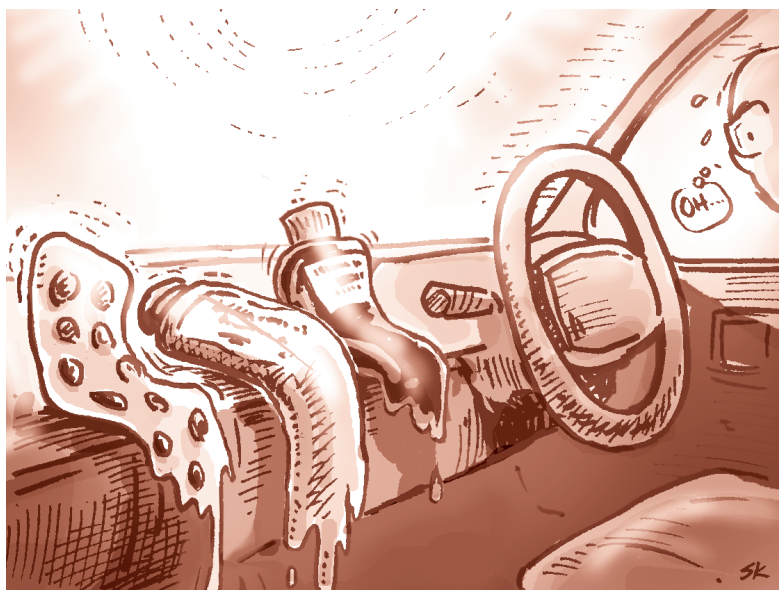
Most medicines are designed to be kept at 'room temperature', that is, between 20–25°C. Keeping them at temperatures cooler than this is not usually a problem, so the instructions for most medicines will tell you to keep them below 25°C or below 30°C.

Such medicines are unlikely to be affected by one hot day. But, if you will be travelling in temperatures above 30°C for more than a day or you know it will be very hot, you will need to protect them from the heat. Possibilities include placing them in a thermos, insulated bag, polystyrene container or small esky. You might also like to take a thermometer (from a camping or hardware store), so you can keep an eye on the container's temperature.

Don't leave your medicines in a hot car, and never in the glove box or on the dashboard. Keep medicines out of sunlight by, for example, putting them in a bag.

In the fridge

Some medicines, such as some eye drops and injections, need to be kept at lower temperatures, so they are normally kept in the fridge. In this case, the fridge means the main compartment of the fridge, not the freezer.



Medicines are like mushrooms. They need to be kept cool and in the dark ... not on the dashboard!

If your medicines are normally kept in the fridge, you should minimise the time they are out of a fridge while travelling. An insulated bag or esky with an ice-brick may be an answer. Ask your pharmacist for advice on where to keep them while travelling.

What is the right temperature?

The medicine's Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet (see back page) will tell you at which temperature your medicine should be kept. If a medicine needs to be kept in the fridge, this will also be on the label.

Take enough

Take enough medicines and prescriptions to last the trip, along with some extra supplies in case your return is delayed. Also, don't forget to take a complete and up-to-date Medicines List (see back page).

And, last but not least, have a good trip! ■

Not getting anywhere? Try another tack

Two-way communication is an essential part of good health care. During medical appointments, you can expect to be respected and listened to, and to be given adequate and understandable explanations of your condition, its treatment, including any alternative treatments, and the anticipated results of those treatments.

However, getting these things is not always straightforward. You may feel that the doctor does not take in what you say, does not give you enough time to explain things, or does not give you the information you need. Or, you may just not get on with each other. Here are some suggestions that might help you get what you need from medical appointments.

Tell the doctor if you don't understand anything, and ask them to go over it again until you do.

Before

Make a longer appointment

Doctors are almost always busy, so if the problem you want to discuss is complex or you need to discuss several issues, ask for a longer appointment when making your booking. You and your doctor may then feel less pressured and more able to concentrate on discussing your problems.

Prepare a summary

Write a concise summary of your medical problems, and list in priority order the main issues you want to

discuss. Take your list with you and offer it to your doctor at the start of the visit, or perhaps post it to them a week or so beforehand. Keep a copy for yourself, so you can tick off the issues as you go.

Make a list of questions

In the week before your appointment, make a list of your questions as you think of them. Doing so will save you the trouble of forgetting what you wanted to ask during the appointment. Make two copies of the list, so you can give one to the doctor and keep one for yourself.

Leave space below each question, so you or the doctor can write down the answers. Check the list before leaving to make sure that every question has been answered.

During

Be honest and ask questions

When describing your problems, give your doctor a complete picture of your symptoms, how you feel, and the key issues as you see them.

Also, tell the doctor if you don't understand anything, and ask them to repeat the explanation or recommendation until you do understand.

Ask any questions you may have, and continue to ask those questions until you understand the answers. The information or answer may be crucial to your health and well-being.

Take another person

If you don't feel confident about handling any aspect of the [cont >](#)

appointment, take a relative or friend with you. They can be your second set of ears, your notetaker or your advocate. After any explanations or recommendations, check with them to make sure that they also understand what has been said.

Take notes and request information

If you think that you may have trouble remembering any important details, write them down at the time, or ask your doctor or relative to do so for you.

If you want to learn more, ask the doctor if they have any written information or suggestions of where you might obtain such information. If you have been prescribed a new medicine, ask for the medicine's Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet (see back page).

After

Make a follow-up appointment

Consider organising a follow-up appointment to ask further questions, discuss outstanding issues, or tell the doctor of your decisions after you've had time to mull over the issues with family and friends.

Get another opinion

If you want to discuss the issues with another health professional, don't hesitate to seek another opinion. The other opinion does not have to come from another doctor or specialist. It may make more sense to talk to someone who looks at the problem from a different perspective, such as a nurse, pharmacist, psychologist or dietitian.



Find another doctor

If you don't feel comfortable with your GP, and don't feel that things will improve soon, consider seeking another one (if this is possible). If you don't feel comfortable with a specialist doctor, tell your GP. They may be able to refer you to another one. Your health and well-being will be best served if you and your doctor trust and respect each other, and work together as a team.

Do some research before making your choice: ask friends and neighbours about their doctors. Sometimes, it helps to check out the waiting rooms, websites and brochures of possible doctors, hospitals or outpatient clinics. Then, make an appointment, preferably when you're feeling well, to check them out. ■

Medicine use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities



Aboriginal Health Workers discussing medicines as part of their Good Medicines Better Health project training.

Islander people feel uncomfortable about using mainstream medical services. They feel that such services don't understand their cultures, or their holistic view of health, which places equal importance on social, emotional, cultural *and* physical well-being. They may also mistrust mainstream services because of past practices, such as the removal of children from their parents, and the removal of communities from their land.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have poor health compared to other Australians, and their life expectancy is 17 years less than that of other Australians. In addition, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have difficulty obtaining medicines and therefore use them much less than other Australians. So, why do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples find it so difficult to obtain medicines?

Poor access to health services and medicines

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples don't have easy access to health services, doctors and pharmacists. For those living in rural and remote areas, the nearest medical services and pharmacies are often many hours away, and they have no way of getting to them. Also, many are on very low incomes, so they have less money left over from their day-to-day expenses to pay for health services and medicines. The problem is worse in areas where doctors don't bulk bill. In addition, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Poor understanding of medicine use

Lack of educational and training opportunities mean that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have difficulty reading and writing. In addition, many have hearing loss following chronic ear infections in childhood. As a result, they may have difficulty understanding directions about what medicines to take and how to take them, which results in people not taking their medicines as prescribed. The problem is exacerbated by health professionals using unfamiliar and complex language, and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being embarrassed about asking health professionals for clarification and advice.

Lack of medicine information

Most standard resources, such as Consumer Medicine Information leaflets (CMIs) (see back page), are unlikely to be suitable for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and little culturally **cont >**

appropriate medicines information has been written for them.

Good Medicines Better Health project

Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's quality use of medicines is seen as an important step to improving their health and life expectancy.

Good Medicines Better Health is a project that is working to do this. It involves the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, and the National Prescribing Service, which is funding the project.

The project is providing quality use of medicines training for Aboriginal Health Workers in the Kimberley,

Western Australia, Port Lincoln, South Australia, and Melbourne, Victoria. The training will enable them to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to help people in their communities manage medicines better.

As part of their training, the Aboriginal Health Workers were asked to provide feedback about the suitability of the National Prescribing Service's resources for people in their communities. Their favourite resource was the Medicines List (see back page). This is a small folder that people can use to list all their medicines, along with details of what the medicine is for, how much to take, and when to take it. They felt that it would be particularly useful for people with chronic conditions and parents of children. ■

Quick quiz

Test your knowledge of the quality use of medicines issues covered in this edition of *MedicinesTalk*.

Are the following statements true or false?

1. Some tablets don't work properly if you crush them.
2. The car glove box is a handy place to keep medicines when travelling.
3. You can ask your doctor to write important information down for you.
4. If you can't swallow capsules, you can get the medicine in a different form instead, for example, as a liquid.

Answers on page 8.

Get MedicinesTalk

Have a free MedicinesTalk posted to you four times a year

Ring 02 8217 8700, and ask to be put on the MedicinesTalk mailing list.

or

Go to www.nps.org.au/consumers, and under 'Free information' in the top right-hand corner, click on 'Order now'.

or

Write to MedicinesTalk, NPS, Reply Paid 1980, Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012.

Download a web version

Go to www.nps.org.au/consumers, and click on 'MedicinesTalk' in the left-hand column.

Useful information

Medicines List

The Medicines List is a compact folder in which to list all your current medicines. Carry it in your handbag or wallet, so it is always on hand. Order a Medicines List from the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

CMI leaflets

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets have been written for most prescription and many non-prescription medicines. The leaflets explain how the medicine works, how and when to take it, common side effects and potential interactions. Obtain the CMI for your medicine from your pharmacist, Medicines Line or the NPS website (www.nps.org.au/consumers).

Medicines Line

Ring Medicines Line on 1300 888 763 to talk to a pharmacist about your prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines for the cost of a local call (mobile calls may cost more). The service is open 9 am–6 pm Monday–Friday (EST).

HealthInsite

HealthInsite (www.healthinsite.gov.au) is the Australian Government website that links you to hundreds of reputable health information websites providing information about medicines, medical conditions and staying healthy.

Home Medicines Review

A Home Medicines Review (HMR) involves a pharmacist visiting your home to check and discuss all your medicines. The visit is organised in consultation with your GP, who receives a report afterwards. Talk to your pharmacist if you want to find out more about HMRs.

Medication organisers

Medication organisers are plastic boxes that help you remember which medicines to take and when to take them. Some, you fill yourself once a day or once a week. Others, called blister packs (eg Webster-pak), are filled by the pharmacist. To find out more, ask your pharmacist.

Quiz answers 1. True. Your pharmacist can tell you if it's alright to crush your tablets or not. 2. False. The glove box can get very hot. 3. True. This can be a good idea if you think you may miss or forget important details. 4. Sometimes true. If not, your doctor or pharmacist can recommend another way of taking your capsules.

Who writes Medicines Talk

MedicinesTalk is written and edited by Ros Wood and Sarah Fogg, and overseen by an Editorial Committee comprising consumer representatives, health professionals and the National Prescribing Service (NPS).

MedicinesTalk is sponsored and published by NPS, an independent non-profit organisation for the Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

ISSN: 1447-3208 (print) and 14447-3216 (online)

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Feedback and suggestions

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