



BC Cancer Agency

Patient Guide to Medication Safety

During your treatment at the BC Cancer Agency, you may need to take medications as part of your treatment. Your healthcare providers will be working to ensure that your treatment is provided in a safe and effective manner.

You and your family are also part of the health care team and can play a very important role in safe medication use. One of the easiest and most important things you can do to prevent medication errors is to become familiar with your treatment, be knowledgeable about your medications, and ask questions whenever you feel unsure or have concerns. By taking part and being involved in your care, you are playing an important role in preventing medication errors.

This pamphlet describes some basic things you can do to ensure safe medication use for you and your family.

Before treatment

- Make a list of all the medications that you take. This includes prescription and non-prescription medications, vitamins, and herbal or food supplements. Your list should include the names of the medications, doses (how much you take), directions (when and how often you take each medication, even if it is only occasionally), and the reason why you are taking each medication. Bring the list with you to your appointments and show it to your doctor, pharmacist, and nurse.
- If you have any allergies, or have had a bad reaction to any medications in the past, tell your doctor, pharmacist, and nurse. It's also a good idea to include this information on your medication list.
- Learn about the new medications that you will be taking during treatment. Find out what they do, how to take them, when you should take them, and what to do if you miss a dose. Ask about possible side effects, and what you should do if they occur. If you don't already have information about your medications, ask your healthcare provider for a pamphlet (handout) for each of your new medications.
- Check to see if you should keep taking your usual medications in addition to the new medications. Ask if it is safe to take those medications together and do the same with vitamins, herbs and other supplements.

During treatment

- Consider bringing a relative or friend with you to your appointments and treatments. They can help you remember any instructions that you are given.
- Understand how your chemotherapy and/or radiation cycles are scheduled and follow any instructions carefully. Sometimes you may need to take medications to prevent side effects for a few days before or after the treatments.
- If something doesn't seem right, tell your healthcare provider. For example, a medication may look different from the last time you picked it up from the pharmacy. Ask questions if you are not sure about what is happening.
- When picking up medications to take home from the pharmacy, or when a nurse is giving you medication, always make sure your full name and another piece of information (such as your birthday) is checked.
- When your nurse gives you any medication, ask what it is and the reason for taking it.
- If you receive medications injected into a vein (intravenous or IV), read the label on the IV fluid bags and ask the nurse how long it should take for the liquid to run out. Tell the nurse if it seems to be dripping too fast or too slow.
- Only take medication that has been prescribed for you by your doctor.
- Never start, stop, or change the dose of any medication, including non-prescription medications, vitamins and herbal or food supplements without checking with your doctor or pharmacist first. This is to make sure that it is safe and that there are no interactions with any other medications you are currently taking.
- If you think you might be having side effects from your medication, follow the instructions on the handout for that medication. If the symptoms are severe, contact your doctor or go to the nearest emergency department.

After treatment

- Ask the doctor to go over your list of medications with you. Ask which medications you should continue, and whether you should restart any medications that had been stopped during your treatment.
- Sometimes you can have side effects even after your treatment is finished. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any new or unexpected problems.

