

Information for Patients and Carers:

Administration of medicines when experiencing swallowing difficulties

NORTHERN IRELAND (NI) REGIONAL MEDICINES AND POISONS INFORMATION SERVICE
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Taking medicines and helping someone with their medicines is a big responsibility and many people can feel worried or afraid. This leaflet will support the information you receive from your local health professionals.

If you are uncertain about anything which is prescribed, or are having trouble taking the medicine because of swallowing problems or other difficulties, then you should discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist. You may not want to trouble them, but they will be very happy to help you.

Problem swallowing?

Always inform a health professional if you or a person you are caring for has difficulty swallowing their medicines or experiences any unpleasant side-effects e.g. dry mouth. A difficulty swallowing medication can be a sign of something that needs further medical assessment and treatment.

Speech and Language Therapists can assess, diagnose and treat swallowing difficulties. They can offer advice on appropriate and safe textures of food and liquids. They can discuss safe swallowing requirements for medication.

The prescriber can review your medicines and consider if there is an alternative way to take the medication to improve swallowing and/or reduce side-effects. It is important to note that some people can also have difficulty swallowing liquids safely and therefore liquid medications may not always be a suitable alternative.

How someone takes their medicine can make a big difference to how well it works. Sometimes the doctor will ask you to disperse tablets in water or open capsules, or add to a small amount of fruit juice or cordial (other than grapefruit/cranberry juice) or add to cool soft food e.g. teaspoon of yoghurt or jam to overcome swallowing difficulties and/or to reduce the risk of choking in vulnerable people. Your doctor or pharmacist will advise you when, and how best to do this.

The following are some important points when taking and giving medicines:

- Ensure you or the person you are caring for is upright, awake and alert before taking or giving any medication.
- Take or give one medication at a time; do not mix all the medicines together.
- Never rush; give yourself or the person you are caring for time to swallow.
- If you are caring for someone else always check that each tablet or capsule has been swallowed and is not sitting in the mouth.
- If you or the person you are caring for is having difficulty taking a whole tablet it may be possible to halve a tablet using a tablet cutter. Ask your doctor or pharmacist before doing this.
- For medicines that are suitable for crushing, crush using a pestle and mortar, a tablet crusher or between two metal spoons.
- Equipment used in the manipulation of tablets and capsules are for individual patients and devices should not be shared between individuals.
- Medicines should only be administered in food with your consent or the patient's knowledge and consent. Hiding medication in food is considered 'covert administration' and is only allowed in certain circumstances.
- If you or the person you are caring for is on thickened fluids some liquid medicines may have to be mixed with thickening agents, when advised by a health professional, and when there is no suitable alternative.

Sometimes a tablet is also available in a different form such as a soluble tablet or alternatively as a liquid, powder or granules for suspension, or a suppository, or (sticky) patch for the skin. If this is the case, your doctor may be able switch the medicine. Sometimes the range of medicines available is limited and the doctor may have to prescribe an unlicensed medicine (or 'special').

What is an unlicensed or 'special' medicine?

A medicine is unlicensed if it has not been issued with a product licence from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). These types of medicines are also described as 'special order products' or 'specials'. 'Specials' are only prescribed when there is no available licensed medicine which fully meets a patient's needs. 'Specials' can sometimes take one or two weeks to arrive at your local pharmacy and may have a short expiry date. In some cases the pharmacist may make a medicine for you in the pharmacy. It is important that you do not let the supply run out or expire before going to the GP to request a further supply.

General medicine information

Make sure that the medicine you have at home has not reached the 'best before' or 'use by' date on the packaging.

If there is any possibility that you or someone you are caring for may have had more than the normal dose or you are worried, contact your doctor or community pharmacist straight away. Take the medicine container or pack/packet with you, even if it is empty. Have the container or packet with you if you telephone for advice. Write down the times that you either took or gave the medication, to help you remember, and to make sure that you do not give too much.

Where should I keep medicines?

Keep the medicine in a cupboard, away from heat and direct sunlight as instructed on the label. Please note that some medicines may need to be kept in the fridge.

Make sure that children cannot see or reach the medicine.

Keep the medicine in the container it came in. Give old, unused or unwanted medicines to your pharmacist to dispose of.

For further advice please contact your local GP practice or community pharmacy. Adapted from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Guidance on the Use of Specials in Primary Care; 17 December 2015, Version 3; How to Reduce the Risk of Choking: carer information leaflet 2016, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. **Date prepared: November 2015 Date Reviewed: January 2018**