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## How this kit can help you



Medication Matters: How You Can Help Seniors Use Medication Safely was developed by Health Canada to help you, as a health professional, give seniors the information they need to use medication safely.

Health Canada recognizes that how you tell seniors about their medication is as important as what you tell them.

Eighty percent\* of seniors in Canada have low-literacy skills and may not understand what health professionals tell them and give them to read. Low-literacy seniors may not be able to ask you questions about their medication.

Medication Matters will help you to use clear verbal communication techniques and plain language health information in your practice so that you can better serve seniors with low literacy skills. Clear verbal communication is easy-to-understand talk while plain language health information is easy-to-read written information which most people understand.

Research shows that people follow health instructions 50 percent more often when clear verbal communication techniques and plain language health information are used in health professional practice.

### Medication Matters:

- Expands upon current medication topics, providing specific information pertinent to seniors' use of medication.
- Offers a versatile format which allows you to share the information in the kit easily.
- Provides medication information in plain language for both health professional and seniors' use.
- Suggests clear verbal communication techniques which facilitate communication with people with low-literacy skills.

Medication Matters is also available on the Internet at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/seniors-aines> and at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/alcohol-otherdrugs>

You may get more general information by accessing <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb>

You may order more kits from:

Division of  
Aging and Seniors  
Health Canada  
Jeanne Mance Building  
Tunney's Pasture  
A.L. #1908A1  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 1B4  
Tel.: 613-952-7606 or  
Fax.: 613-957-7627

\* Source: Statistics Canada, Reading Our Future, International Adult Literacy Study, 1995 (page 37)



## How to use this kit

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Medication Matters is easy to use. There are three sections:

### 1. Introduction and Overview

- How to use this kit
- Clear verbal communication
- Plain language health information

### 2. Information sheets

### 3. Plain language medication information for seniors

Section 1 will help you become acquainted with this kit. It gives you the purpose for this resource and outlines how best to use it.

This section suggests clear verbal communication techniques which are effective in increasing patients' comprehension of medication instructions.

It also explains what plain language health information looks like so that you can choose easy-to-read medication information for seniors who have low-literacy skills.

Section 2 provides you with five information sheets, written in plain language, on medication topics which you may find are important to discuss. Refer to them during your visits with seniors because they are written in an easy-to-read conversational style that can be easily understood.

Section 3 consists of three pamphlets which are written for people who have poor reading skills. You may wish to photocopy these pamphlets and use them to supplement and/or reinforce the medication information you tell seniors during the visits. Literate seniors will also enjoy these pamphlets because they will be able to quickly learn what they need to know.

# How to talk with seniors about their medication: using clear verbal communication



Clear verbal communication is a way of speaking which is easy to understand. Research shows that patients follow instructions more often when clear verbal communication techniques are used.

To make what you say easy to remember:

1. Organize your information.
  - Decide on the three to five most important points.
  - Tell your clients what you're going to cover and then give the details.
2. Use common words, not technical jargon.
  - Instead of saying: This is a topical ointment, you might say: This medicine is to be put on your skin.

3. Check that your patients have understood what you have said.
  - You can say: I talk to so many people that I sometimes leave things out. Would you repeat what I just told you? I want to be sure I have explained everything.
4. Give your patients a chance to express how they are feeling.
  - Listen to your patients. If they are in pain, uncomfortable or having strong feelings (anger, fear, confusion), give them a chance to say so.
  - A kind human gesture helps people listen and learn better because they feel understood.
5. Use written information as a back-up.
  - Personal contact is the best way to make sure your message is understood.
  - Written information should be a simple reminder of what they have learned from you.
6. Plan, with your patients, what they can do.
  - When patients have difficulty following your instructions, consider that they may not be able to do what you ask. Plan together what is realistic for them.



## Plain language health information: what does it look like?



Plain language is a way of organizing and presenting information so that it makes sense to most people. Health information written in plain language helps you get your message across to the greatest number of people the first time.

It usually:

- Covers only three to five points and organizes the information clearly.
- Uses simple graphics and techniques such as point form, bold type and underlining to highlight the most important points.
- Uses short words and short sentences.
- Uses common words rather than technical jargon.
- Gives your patient practical information.

Section 3 includes three plain language pamphlets for seniors with low-literacy skills which you can photocopy and distribute.



## What seniors need to know about their medication



Seniors, especially those with low-literacy skills, may have a difficult time asking you for information about their medication. Answering the following questions in the Checklist is a good start to providing the most important information seniors require to take their medication properly. As a health professional, you will probably identify additional information that is important for your patient to know.

### Checklist

This Checklist is also included in Section 3 of this kit. It is the first pamphlet, What You Need to Know About Your Medication, written in plain language for seniors. You may want to photocopy it so that when you go through the Checklist with your patient, they can write down your answers on their copy and take it home with them. You can photocopy the pamphlet for each medication your patient is taking.

Make sure you answer these questions:

1. What is the name of the medication?
2. Why do they need to take this medication?
3. How should they take the medication?
4. What are the side effects of the medication?
5. What do they do when they run out of the medication?
6. Where do they keep the medication?
7. What do they do with medication they no longer need?
8. Who should they talk to about their medication?  
Doctor/Pharmacist/Nurse?

(Give your patient names and phone numbers.)

### Reminders:

- If the senior's mother tongue is different than yours, you may want to have someone who speaks the language of the senior present to help with difficult words and phrases.
- Explain to seniors that the term medication includes prescription, non-prescription or over-the-counter medicine such as pain pills, cough and cold remedies, allergy and laxative pills as well as vitamins, herbal, homeopathic and naturopathic remedies.
- Remind seniors not to share their medication with anyone else.



## Tips to help seniors take their medication correctly



Plastic pill containers and the Medication Record are aids which can help seniors take their medications correctly. The following tips can complement these aids by increasing your awareness of the issues which affect safe medication use among low-literacy seniors. It will also give you some tools to increase seniors' awareness of what else they can do to prevent medication misuse.

### 1. Explain to seniors what take as directed means.

Write down medication instructions in plain language in their Medication Record. Give them an information sheet in plain language which describes how to take their medication.

### 2. If your patient is taking pills, describe the colour and shape of these pills when you are explaining how and when to take them.

Seniors with low-literacy skills often identify their medication by its colour and shape. They will often find their over-the-counter medication in a pharmacy by remembering where it is physically located in the store as well as by the colour and shape of the packaging.

### 3. Encourage seniors to request medication labels printed in large type on flat surfaces.

Seniors find it easier to read larger type (not block capital

letters) on medication labels. It is more difficult for them to read labels on round bottles or containers that they have to turn as they read. Pharmacists could duplicate medication labels and place one label on the medication bottle or container and one on a flat surface such as a medication information sheet, blank piece of paper or medication box.

### 4. Tell your patient to take their medication where there is enough light to read medication instructions and see the medication.

Some seniors take their medication in the dark where it is easy to make mistakes.

### 5. Tell your patient to stand or sit while they take their medication.

Often seniors will take their medication when they are lying down. Encourage them to sit or stand for at least 15 minutes after they take

their medication. Explain to them that their medication can reach their stomach and start to work faster when they are either sitting or standing.

### 6. Remind seniors to keep their medication out of the sight and reach of children.

You may want to remind seniors about the medications they carry in their purse as well as those they keep in their home.

### 7. Encourage seniors to let you know if they prefer taking their medication in either tablet, capsule or liquid form.

If the medication your patient takes is available in different forms, ask them if they have a preference. If it is not available in different forms, let them know if they can crush tablets or open and dissolve capsules in water.



## How to help seniors keep track of their medications



Seniors often take more than one medication at a time. Mixing medications, missing doses or taking too much medication can cause very serious problems.

If your patient takes only one or two daily medications, it may be helpful to suggest that they take their medications at the same time as they do something else that they do every day, such as brush their teeth.

If your patient takes several different kinds of medication, it may be helpful to suggest one of the following methods for keeping track of all their medications.

### Plastic container

Pharmacies have plastic pill containers which have separate compartments for each day of the week and for times of the day (breakfast, lunch, dinner, bedtime). Your patients will be able to keep enough medication for one week in their containers. If they miss a dose, they will know right away by looking at their containers.

Ask your patients if they feel comfortable filling their containers by themselves. If they don't, you may want to suggest that they ask a relative, friend or nurse to do this with them.

### Medication Record

A second way seniors can keep track of their medications is by writing down all the information for each of their medications in a Medication Record. This kit includes a sample Record which you can photocopy and give to your patients. You may want to enter one or two of your patient's medications to show them how to use the Record.

## Medication, alcohol and food



Some prescribed and over-the-counter medication does not interact well with alcohol and certain foods. Here are suggestions for discussing this topic with seniors.

### Medication and alcohol

If the medication interacts with alcohol, you will want to discourage alcohol consumption. Here are some suggestions on what you may want to explain and how to say it simply:

- Alcohol changes the way your medication works in your body.
- Alcohol gets in the way of your medication doing what it is supposed to do.

- If you drink while you take your medication you may feel:
  - ✓ drowsy
  - ✓ confused
  - ✓ dizzy
  - ✓ faint
  - ✓ sick to your stomach
  - ✓ headache

When you have any of these feelings and are trying to do things such as drive a car or use any kind of machine like a lawn mower, for example, it is very dangerous.

Remember too, alcohol is not only in beer, wine and

hard liquor like gin or vodka, but also in some cold and cough medicines and some mouthwashes.

You may also want to ask your patient to tell you about all the medication they are taking. They may be taking over-the-counter medications which may react with alcohol. It is helpful to people with low-literacy skills if you give examples of what you mean when you ask this question. You could say: Are you taking any medicine or pills like something for a stuffy nose or something that helps you sleep that you got off the shelf at a drug store?



## Medication, alcohol and food (continued)



### Medication and food

Although medication labels usually tell patients whether to take medication before, after or during meals, they are often difficult for seniors with low-literacy skills to read. It is important to answer the following questions for seniors during your visits with them:

- Do they take their medication with, before or after food?
- How long before or after food should they take their medication?
- Do they take their medication with anything other than water?

It may be helpful for you to give them a copy of the Medication Record included in this kit so they can write down your instructions in the Record and take it home with them.

If your patient is taking medication which is affected by food, it is more helpful to list the specific foods they should eat or not eat rather than name the group these foods belong to.

For example, with blood pressure medication, you would probably recommend a low-salt diet.

Rather than simply saying: Eat a low salt diet while you are on this medication, you could tell your patient: you should avoid salted crackers, canned soup, prepared luncheon meats, pickles, ketchup, olives, relish, hotdogs, soya sauce and soda water. You may also want to have a list of these foods typed out with just a simple heading like: Foods Not to Eat For a Low-Salt Diet.

If your patient is taking diuretics, you will probably want to encourage her/him to eat and drink more foods with potassium. Rather than telling them to eat and drink foods rich in potassium like citrus fruits and juices, you could say more simply that they should eat and drink foods rich in potassium like orange juice, prunes and prune juice, grapefruit juice, milk, yogurt, potatoes and bananas.



## Medication alternatives

Some health problems can be solved without the use of prescription or over-the-counter medication, but some people may expect a prescription every time they visit their doctor.

Encourage proper nutrition, exercise and spending time with friends and family as a first step to raising awareness about medication alternatives.

Get a copy of the Canada's Food Guide for Healthy Eating from your local community health centre or public health unit and encourage seniors to follow it.

Here are some tips for specific complaints that are in an easy-to-understand conversational style which you can use in your visits.

### Indigestion and heartburn:

If you get a burning or bloated feeling after you eat it may help to:

- Cut down or stop having coffee, strong tea, cola-type soft drinks, chocolate and sugar because they make too much acid in your stomach.
- Not eat spicy food.
- Not eat late at night.
- Stop smoking.
- Stay away from anything that has peppermint in it like peppermint gum or candy or peppermint tea.

- Use an extra pillow under your head when you sleep so that your head is higher than the rest of your body.

If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. You should not have more than one drink on any occasion.

### Stress and anxiety:

If you are anxious or tense:

- Take a walk around the block or in your local shopping mall.
- Take an exercise class at your local school, community or seniors' centre.
- Tell a friend, family member or your doctor how you feel.
- See a counselor or join a support group so that you can

talk more about your anxious feelings.

- Try to relax by breathing slowly and deeply.
- Take a relaxation class, like yoga, at your local school or community centre.
- Choose an activity you really enjoy doing, like listening to your favorite music, and do it.
- Take a course and learn how to do a new activity at your local community or seniors' centre.



## Medication alternatives (continued)

Sleeping problems:

If you can't sleep:

- Get up and do something else. Then, go back to bed.
- Drink warm milk, or hot water with lemon before you go to bed.
- Get fresh air and exercise during the day.
- Take a warm bath, read a little or listen to some quiet music in the evening.
- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.

Be cautious:

- Don't drink coffee, strong tea or cola-type soft drinks after 4 p.m.
- Don't drink alcohol in the evening—it can keep you up.
- Don't eat spicy or fried food in the evening.
- Don't take naps during the day.

Coughs and cold

If you have a cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose and/or feel achey:

- Rest as much as you can.
- Drink a lot of liquids, 6-8 glasses of water or juice.
- Use a vaporizer if you have one, and keep it running as long as you are sick.
- Stop smoking.

Constipation

When you are discussing sensitive health concerns, you may use more technical terms like constipation and irregular bowel movements to ease embarrassment or discomfort in the exchange with your patient. Seniors with low-literacy skills may not understand these terms. Try to use familiar terms which everyone can understand. If you prefer, you can also use the technical terms and explain them in plain language.

Here are some plain language tips for constipation complaints:

- If you do not have a bowel movement (which means you are not going number two each day), it does not mean you have a problem.
- If you are taking medication with iron or codeine, this may cause you to be constipated (which means you may have trouble going number two).
- Try to drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of water a day.
- Eat foods that have lots of fibre such as whole wheat bread, shredded wheat and bran cereals, legumes, fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Walk or do some kind of exercise every day.



## What you need to know about your medication (medicine, pills)

Medication (medicine, pills) can help you feel better. It can also hurt you if you don't take it right. To take your medication safely, you need to know:

1. What is the correct name of my medication?

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2. Why do I need to take this medication?

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3. How do I take this medication?

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4. What are the side effects of this medication?

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5. What should I do if I run out of this medication?

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6. Where should I keep my medication?

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7. What do I do with medication I don't need anymore?

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Who do I talk to when I have a problem or question?

Name and  
Telephone.No.

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## What you should tell your doctor, nurse and pharmacist

Tell your doctor, nurse and pharmacist:

- About all the medication (medicine, pills) you take. This means you should tell them about:
  1. Prescriptions
  2. Over-the-counter drugs like pain medications, laxatives, cough syrup
  3. Vitamins
  4. Herbal medicine

- If you smoke or drink alcohol. Some medication may not work if you take it and drink alcohol or smoke tobacco.
- If you have any allergies to foods or medications.
- If you see other health providers such as:
  1. Other doctors, nurses (at a hospital or emergency clinic) or pharmacists (at a new drugstore).
  2. Naturopath, homeopath or herbalist (these health providers use herbs, vitamins, natural foods and medicine to help you get better).
  3. Nutritionist (who helps you with what you eat).

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## Don't forget

- Ask your doctor or nurse about things you can do to help yourself get better without using medication. For example, exercise, rest and eating healthy foods.
  - Try to use the same pharmacy (drugstore) so that your pharmacist can keep a record of all your medication and give you the best advice.
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## Personal Medication Record for

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Doctor

Pharmacy

1. List your medicine – one to a box on the left
    - name
    - colour and shape
    - how much you take.

- Under the days of the week
    - write the times you take the medicine
    - when you take your medicine cross out the time

3. Check the example in the first row.  
When you fill out the record, your doctor, pharmacist, nurse, or a family member can help you.