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FREE GUIDE · No. 2

How to take medicines correctly

Ten common medication mistakes and what to do instead, explained in clear language.

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Updated: November 2026

Correct use is part of the treatment

The World Health Organization has reported that, in developed countries, adherence to long-term treatment for chronic diseases averages only about 50%.[1] Often the problem is not deliberate. People simply have not been given clear, practical instructions.

This guide brings together ten mistakes I see most often at the pharmacy counter and explains what to do instead. The product leaflet and the instructions for your specific medicine always come first. Advice can differ between medicines, formulations and patients.

The ten mistakes and how to avoid them

1 Stopping an antibiotic as soon as you feel better
Symptoms may improve before the infection is fully controlled. Stopping early can allow the problem to return, and inappropriate antibiotic use contributes to resistance.
What to do: take the antibiotic for exactly as long as the prescriber intended, even when you start to feel better. If you have side effects, contact the prescriber or pharmacist instead of stopping, extending or saving the course on your own.[2]

2 Doubling the dose after forgetting one
A double dose does not simply “catch up”. It increases the risk of side effects and can be dangerous with some medicines. The correct response to a missed dose also differs between medicines.
What to do: check the patient leaflet or ask a pharmacist. Do not take two doses to make up for a forgotten one unless a prescriber has specifically told you to do so. Insulin, epilepsy medicines, contraceptives, anticoagulants and some other treatments require particular care.[3]

3 Taking every medicine with coffee, tea or milk
Calcium in dairy products and calcium-fortified drinks can reduce the absorption of some tetracycline and quinolone antibiotics, iron products and levothyroxine. Coffee and tea can also be unsuitable with certain medicines. The necessary interval is not the same for every product.
What to do: water is the usual default, but follow the leaflet. Ask exactly how many hours to leave between your specific medicine and dairy, supplements or other drinks.

4 Drinking grapefruit juice during treatment

Grapefruit can change how certain medicines are broken down or transported, leading to higher or lower exposure. Affected products include some statins, some blood-pressure medicines and several others. It does not affect every medicine in these groups.

What to do: ask whether grapefruit affects your specific medicine. If the leaflet says to avoid it, spacing the juice and the dose by a few hours may not remove the interaction. Check juice blends and other citrus products named in the leaflet.[4]

5 Splitting, chewing or crushing tablets to make them easier to swallow

Modified-release and gastro-resistant tablets can release the dose too quickly or be damaged by stomach acid when altered. A score line does not always mean that splitting is appropriate, and some capsules should not be opened.

What to do: alter a tablet or capsule only when the leaflet or a pharmacist confirms that it is safe for that exact product. If swallowing is difficult, ask about a liquid, dispersible tablet or another formulation.

6 Taking ibuprofen without checking the food instructions

Ibuprofen and related non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can irritate the stomach and can cause ulcers or bleeding, especially with higher doses, longer use or additional risk factors.

What to do: follow the specific packet. Many ibuprofen tablets are best taken with or after food and water, but food does not remove the risk of stomach harm. Ask before use if you have had an ulcer, kidney disease, relevant cardiovascular risk or take interacting medicines.[5]

7 Storing medicines in the bathroom or in sunlight

Heat, moisture and light can damage medicines before their expiry date. A bathroom cabinet and a car dashboard are unsuitable for many products.

What to do: follow the pack's temperature and storage instructions, keep products in their original packaging and make them inaccessible to children. Refrigerate only when instructed. During travel, ask how to maintain any required cold chain.

8 Mixing medicines with alcohol

Alcohol can increase drowsiness with sedating medicines, add to stomach or liver risks, and change how some treatments work. Heavy drinking is particularly important to discuss with a healthcare professional.
What to do: check the alcohol section of the leaflet and ask a pharmacist about your specific treatment. When the pack says to avoid alcohol, this applies throughout treatment, not only at the moment you swallow the dose.

9 Giving your prescription to a relative or friend

“It helped me” is not a safety assessment. The same ingredient can harm someone with different conditions, allergies or medicines. Adult doses are not made suitable for children simply by reducing them.
What to do: medicines are personal. Help the other person contact a doctor or pharmacist rather than sharing your own supply.

10 Not telling the doctor or pharmacist everything you take

Prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, vitamins, food supplements and herbal products can interact. “Natural” does not mean interaction-free.
What to do: keep a current list with product names, doses and times. Include products used only occasionally and show the list at every consultation and pharmacy visit.

The golden rules in one place

- Use water unless the specific leaflet gives different instructions.
- Take the prescribed dose at the prescribed time. Do not change it yourself.
- Take antibiotics for the prescribed duration and never use leftovers without advice.
- Never double a missed dose unless a prescriber has specifically instructed you to do so.
- Read the sections on interactions, food, alcohol and storage.
- Keep medicines in their original packaging and out of children’s reach.
- Carry an up-to-date list of everything you take, including supplements and herbal products.

The pharmacist is an accessible source of help

When you are unsure how to take a medicine, whether it can be combined with another product or what the leaflet means, ask at the pharmacy. Bring the packet and your medicine list so that the answer can be specific to you.

> ### When to seek urgent medical help
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> Swelling of the face, lips or tongue, difficulty breathing, fainting or a rapidly spreading reaction after a new medicine can be an emergency. Call 112 for life-threatening symptoms. For a rash, repeated vomiting or another unusual reaction, stop and seek prompt professional advice rather than continuing just to see what happens.

Have a question about a specific medicine?

On mom-pharma.com you will find the free “Ask Didi” chat, where I answer personally. Registration is quick and free, and the answers use clear language.

Sources

[1] World Health Organization. (2003). *Adherence to long-term therapies: Evidence for action*.

[2] NHS. (2026). *Phenoxymethylpenicillin: Antibiotic for bacterial infections*.

[3] NHS Specialist Pharmacy Service. (2025). *Advising on missed or delayed doses of medicines*.

[4] U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2021). *Grapefruit juice and some drugs don’t mix*.

[5] NHS. (2026). *Ibuprofen for adults*.

This guide is for information only and does not replace advice from a doctor or pharmacist about your specific situation. Do not change prescribed treatment yourself. If you are uncertain or have questions, contact a healthcare professional.

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