

Prescription medicines

You can't get prescription medicines unless someone with authority prescribes them. Usually this means a written prescription from your doctor. The prescription is a form filled out by the doctor that includes all the information on the required medicine, including its name, type, dose and how long you need to take it.

Make sure you understand why your doctor is prescribing this medicine for you, how you are meant to take it, and any possible side effects. Keep asking questions until you feel satisfied. You can also ask your pharmacist for advice.

Instructions on how to take the medicine are typed on a label and stuck to the medicine container by your pharmacist.

The prescription form

Doctors usually use computers to prepare prescriptions. Occasionally, they may handwrite prescriptions using medical shorthand that pharmacists can understand.

The prescription is a standard form that contains the following information:

- The doctor's name and address
- Your name and address
- Your Medicare number
- The date the prescription was written
- Tick boxes that indicate whether you are eligible for any concessions on the purchase price of the prescription medicine
- The type of prescription medicine required, including the dose.

Information about the prescription medicine

The doctor's prescription gives the pharmacist instructions on the required prescription medicine including:

- The name of the medicine
- Whether or not brand substitution is allowed – that means, if the pharmacist can give you an alternative brand with the same active ingredient
- The type of preparation – for example, tablets or cream
- The strength of each individual dose – for example, 75 milligrams (mg) per dose
- For some medicines, such as liquids and creams, the strength of the preparation. For example, a liquid may contain 75 milligrams of medicine per five-millilitre (ml) dose
- How often the medicine should be taken – for example, once daily
- The number of doses – for example, 40 tablets
- Repeat prescriptions, if any, to be filled once the current prescription runs out.

Information on the prescription medicine pharmacy label

The pharmacist will dispense the prescription medicine using the instructions on the prescription form. The information from the prescription will be repeated on the label that the pharmacist will stick to the medicine container.

Extra information

The pharmacist may include other instructions on how to take your medicine and how to look after your medicine. For example, 'to be taken with meals', or 'to be stored in a cool place'.

Warnings

The pharmacist may put warning stickers on your medicine container – for example 'may cause dizziness' or 'do not drink alcohol'.

Ask your pharmacist to explain any instructions or warnings if there is anything you don't understand.

Consumer Medicine Information

All prescription medicines have an information leaflet called Consumer Medicine Information (CMI). This leaflet includes detailed information on the medicine in plain English, including how to use it, side effects and precautions. The CMI is available free from your pharmacist and is often inside the medicine packaging.

CMIs are also available on the web, including the Better Health Channel and the National Prescribing Service websites. Some things to remember when you use the CMI:

- Don't confuse advertising material with the CMI. The CMI has been checked for accuracy by regulatory medicine authorities and should be clearly headed 'Consumer Medicine Information'. If you're unsure, check with your doctor or pharmacist.
- The CMI gives detailed information about the medicine, including how it might be taken and possible dosages. These examples may differ from the label attached to the medicine container. Make sure you take the medicine strictly as your doctor prescribed.
- Read carefully through the list of possible side effects. Contact your doctor or pharmacist if you are concerned.

Use the detailed information in the CMI to help you talk to your doctor or pharmacist about any concerns you may have with your treatment.

Multiple doctors

Some people see a number of different general practitioner (GP) doctors. Points to consider include:

- Make sure the GP treating you has your complete medical record. If you see a different GP on another occasion, make sure you inform them of any previous treatment.
- Medicines can interact with each other and cause unwanted side effects. Tell each GP about any medicines you are taking, including prescription, non-prescription (over-the-counter) and complementary medicines (such as herbal remedies, vitamins and supplements).
- Sticking to one GP has advantages, especially if you have an ongoing illness that requires medical supervision. It is harder to get safe and effective health care if you spread your treatment across more than one doctor.

Beware of buying prescription medicines online

The Internet allows consumers to buy all sorts of products online, including prescription medicines. Some sites are legitimate. However, other sites operate outside of Australian law, which means you run the risk of buying fake, out-of-date, inappropriate or unsafe medicines. Suggestions include:

- If you want to purchase your medicines over the Internet, ask your doctor for recommended online pharmacies.
- Always see your doctor for a diagnosis. Avoid sites that offer to diagnose your illness online.
- Avoid websites that offer to sell you prescription medicines without a prescription.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist

Things to remember

- A prescription medicine is any medicine that needs your doctor's authorisation before the pharmacist will supply it to you.
- Instructions on how to take the medicine are typed on a label and stuck to the medicine container by your pharmacist.
- All prescription medicines have an information leaflet called Consumer Medicine Information (CMI).
- Know why you are taking the medicine and for how long you need to take it.

You might also be interested in

- Medicines - safety issues
- Medicines and side effects
- Drugs and poisons - regulations

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

NPS: Better choices, Better Health

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