HEALTH BASICS

Prescription medications

Prescription medications are medicines supplied with authorization from a qualified prescriber.

WHAT IT IS
Medicine authorized by a qualified prescriber

WHERE IT COMES UP
After a diagnosis, procedure, or medication review

WHY IT MATTERS
Safe use can improve benefits and reduce harm

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A pharmacist, prescriber, or medicines information service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Medication review and monitoring tests when needed

Overview

A prescription medication is a medicine that requires authorization from a qualified health professional, called a prescriber. Depending on local law, prescribers may include doctors, dentists, nurse practitioners, physician associates, or other licensed professionals.

Prescription medications are not a disease or diagnosis. They are tools used for many purposes, such as treating an infection, controlling pain, lowering blood pressure, replacing a hormone, or helping prevent a health problem from returning.

Some medicines need a prescription because their safe use requires professional judgment. A prescriber may need to choose the strength, check other medicines you take, adjust treatment for kidney or liver function, or arrange follow-up tests.

A prescription does not mean a medicine is risk-free or suitable for everyone. It means a prescriber has authorized it for a particular person and situation. The pharmacist then checks and supplies the medicine, gives directions, and can answer questions about its use.

How it works

A prescription identifies the medicine, its strength, its form, and how it should be used. The form might be a tablet, liquid, skin cream, injection, inhaler, eye drop, or patch. Instructions may also state how often to use it and for how long.

Medicines work in different ways. Some act on receptors, which are structures on cells that receive chemical signals. Others block enzymes, replace substances the body lacks, kill or slow microorganisms, or change how the immune system responds.

After a medicine enters your body, it may be absorbed into the bloodstream, distributed to tissues, broken down, and removed. The liver and kidneys often help process or clear medicines. Age, pregnancy, genes, illness, food, and other medicines can affect these steps.

A brand name is the name chosen by a manufacturer. A generic name identifies the active ingredient. Generic medicines approved by a medicines regulator must meet standards for quality and performance, although inactive ingredients, appearance, or packaging may differ.

Some prescriptions are used "off-label." This means an approved medicine is prescribed for an age group, condition, dose, or route not included in its official product labeling. Off-label use is not the same as experimental or improper use, but the prescriber should have a clinical reason for recommending it.

Why it matters for your health

Using a medicine correctly can affect how well it works and how likely it is to cause harm. Taking too much, missing doses, stopping suddenly, or using it with an interacting substance may change its effects.

Your full medication list matters. Prescription medicines can interact with nonprescription medicines, vitamins, herbal products, alcohol, recreational drugs, or certain foods. An interaction may make a medicine stronger, weaker, or more likely to cause unwanted effects.

Some medicines require monitoring. This may involve blood pressure checks, blood tests, heart tracing, weight measurements, or review of symptoms and side effects. Monitoring is specific to the medicine and your health circumstances; many prescriptions do not require special tests.

How you use a medicine also matters. Crushing a modified-release tablet, cutting a patch, using the wrong inhaler technique, or measuring liquid with a kitchen spoon can change the amount delivered. A pharmacist can show you how to use a product and whether its form can be altered safely.

What can go wrong

An adverse effect , also called a side effect, is an unwanted effect that occurs while using a medicine. Some are mild and temporary. Others require a change in treatment or medical assessment. The patient information leaflet and dispensing label describe important known effects, but they cannot predict exactly what any one person will experience.

A medicine interaction happens when another substance changes a medicine's action. Interactions can involve other prescriptions, over-the-counter products, supplements, foods, or alcohol.

A medication error may involve the wrong medicine, dose, timing, person, or method of use. Similar names or packaging, an outdated medication list, and receiving care from several services can contribute to errors.

Duplicate therapy means taking two medicines with the same or similar active ingredients without realizing it. This can happen when a prescription and a nonprescription product contain the same ingredient.

Some medicines can cause physical dependence, meaning the body adapts to their presence. Stopping them suddenly may then cause withdrawal effects. Dependence is not the same as addiction, which includes compulsive use despite harm. Do not stop a long-term prescription abruptly unless a clinician has told you it is safe.

An allergic reaction is an immune response to a medicine. Seek emergency help for trouble breathing, swelling of the face or tongue, fainting, or a widespread blistering or peeling rash. An unresponsive person, a suspected overdose, or severe confusion also needs emergency help. In the United States, Poison Control is available at 1-800-222-1222; elsewhere, use your local poison information or emergency service.

For less urgent concerns-such as a new mild effect, difficulty following the schedule, or uncertainty about whether treatment is helping-contact a pharmacist or prescriber for routine advice. Do not wait for the next appointment if the problem is worsening or preventing you from using the medicine safely.

What you can do

Keep an up-to-date record of everything you use. Include prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbal products, injections, inhalers, patches, and medicines taken only when needed. Record any medicine allergies and what reaction occurred.

When receiving a new prescription, ask:

Read the pharmacy label each time a prescription is supplied. Check your name, the medicine, strength, directions, and appearance. Packaging or tablet appearance can change when the manufacturer changes, but an unexpected difference is worth checking before use.

Use the measuring device supplied with a liquid medicine. Ask for a demonstration if you are unsure how to use an inhaler, injection, eye drop, patch, or other device.

Do not share prescription medicines. A medicine selected for you may be unsafe for another person, even if their health concern seems similar.

If cost, swallowing problems, side effects, or a complicated schedule make treatment difficult, tell your pharmacist or prescriber. There may be a different formulation, simpler schedule, lower-cost option, or safe treatment adjustment. Do not change the dose or split, crush, or stop the medicine without checking first.

Store medicines according to the label and away from children or anyone who might take them accidentally. Remove expired or unwanted medicines through a pharmacy take-back service or other approved local program. Do not flush medicines unless the label or an official disposal list specifically instructs you to do so.

- What is this medicine for?
- How and when should I use it?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Are there important interactions or activities to avoid?
- Does it require follow-up or monitoring?
- Which effects need routine advice, urgent assessment, or emergency help?

Common questions

Is a prescription medicine stronger than an over-the-counter medicine?

Not necessarily. Prescription status reflects the level of professional oversight needed, not simply the medicine's strength. Over-the-counter products can also cause serious effects or interactions if used incorrectly.

Are generic medicines lower quality?

Approved generic medicines must meet regulatory standards for quality, strength, and performance. Their color, shape, packaging, or inactive ingredients may differ from the brand-name product. Ask a pharmacist if a change in appearance concerns you.

Can I stop when I feel better?

That depends on the medicine and why it was prescribed. Some treatments can be stopped when no longer needed, while others require a planned reduction or a full treatment course. Ask before stopping if the instructions are unclear.

What if I miss a dose?

The right action is medicine-specific. Check the patient leaflet or dispensing label, or ask a pharmacist. Taking two doses together can be unsafe unless the instructions specifically say to do so.

Should I tell clinicians about medicines I rarely take?

Yes. Include occasional medicines, supplements, and products bought without a prescription. They may still affect treatment choices, procedures, pregnancy care, or test results.

How can I tell whether a medicine is working?

Some effects are noticeable, such as reduced pain. Others are checked through measurements or tests, such as blood pressure or cholesterol. Ask what outcome is expected and when it should be reviewed.

Sources

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Think It Through: Managing the Benefits and Risks of Medicines
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Avoiding Drug Interactions
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Understanding Unapproved Use of Approved Drugs "Off Label"
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration - Disposal of Unused Medicines: What You Should Know
- MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine - Medicines
- National Institute on Aging - Safe Use of Medicines for Older Adults