

HEALTH JOURNAL

Take Your Medicine: Strategies For Sticking to a Drug Regimen

Last summer, my doctor wrote me a prescription for a twice-daily medication. While swallowing a pill two times a day sounds simple enough, I rarely remember. I have scribbled reminders on my bathroom mirror and even pasted a "Take Your Pill" sign on my computer. Try as I might, I can't seem to get into the habit.



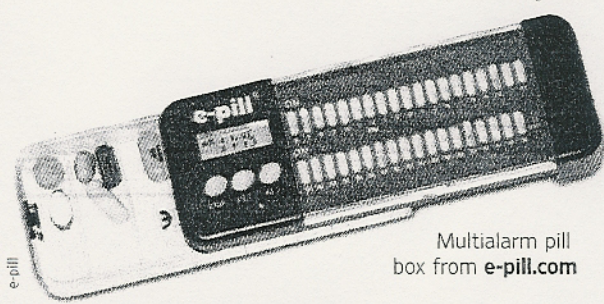
By Tara Parker-Pope

As it turns out, I'm not alone. One of the most vexing problems in health care today is the fact that as many as 50% of patients don't take their medicine on a regular basis or at all. The reasons are complex.

Patients with high blood pressure, high cholesterol or osteoporosis often forget to take their drugs because they don't have obvious symptoms to remind them. Other patients stop taking pills when they start to feel better—as is common with antibiotics.

"There are a lot of reasons why people are not taking their medications as prescribed," says Sunil Kripalani, assistant professor of medicine at Emory University in Atlanta. "For some, it's an issue of simply remembering."

Dr. Kripalani recently reviewed dozens of studies on medication compliance to determine what, if anything, can improve the chances of a patient's taking his or her pills on a regular basis. The review, published in the Archives of Internal Medicine in March, found that tactics such as follow-up phone calls from pharmacists, drug coupons on refills, simpli-



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fied dosing and packaging, and even electronic pill dispensers can all help.

Getting patients to take their medicine has a big impact on the health-care industry. When patients take their pills, drug companies earn more, insurance companies lower costs and patients are healthier. A study in Asheville, N.C., paid pharmacists to counsel patients and make sure they were taking their medication. City workers were offered financial incentives to take part in the program. After one year, the workers' average blood-sugar levels had dropped 6%, the city was saving an average of \$500 per patient in health-care costs, and the workers took an average of 6.5 fewer sick days than similar workers not in the program.

Alan Brookhart, an instructor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, says patients can be erratic in their medication habits, often allowing long lapses between refills. A study of statin use recently published in the Archives of Internal Medicine showed that frequent follow-up with a doctor can improve adherence. "A physician visit appears to trigger a reinitiation of therapy," says Dr. Brookhart.

Drug companies, which stand to

gain millions if more patients refill prescriptions, have gotten into the act, offering easier dosing regimens and reminder programs. Roche Laboratories offers Boniva, a once-a-month osteoporosis drug, which it says is easier to take than weekly bone drugs like Merck & Co.'s Fosamax. The MyBoniva program on the

Web offers a free first prescription and monthly reminders. Novartis, maker of Diovan and Lotrel blood-pressure drugs, offers a free trial, money-off coupons on refills,

and a free blood-pressure monitor at its BP Success Zone Web site.

Packaging changes can also help. While most antibiotics come in pill bottles, Pfizer has packaged its Zithromax brand as a Z-pack—which uses foil packaging and labeling for each day of the five-day treatment.

Patients should check to see if a drug company offers a reminder program or discounts on refills. In addition, a doctor may be able to simplify the prescription, substituting a simpler dose or offering an extended-release pill. Doctors and pharmacists can also look at your entire pill schedule and help you simplify it.

Drugstores and Web sites such as epill.com offer inexpensive pill boxes and high-tech electronic versions with alarms. Researchers at Emory University are developing an individualized picture-card system (www.picturexcard.com) that includes pictures of pills to help patients keep track of complicated pill schedules. Experts say it's also a good idea to link your pill taking with an activity you do every day—like brushing your teeth or shaving.

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For more information please contact

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