



# SEIZURE MEDICATIONS

HOW TO TAKE THEM  
SAFELY AND CORRECTLY

The Epilepsy Center  
University of North Carolina  
Chapel Hill

**UNC**  
*HealthCare*  
**KEEPING YOU WELL AND WELL-INFORMED**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Treatment of your epilepsy should be a partnership between you and your doctor. Working together, the goal is to get the best possible control of your seizures.

Most people are able to get control of their seizures by taking medicines. The purpose of this booklet is to give you information about seizure medicines. **This booklet is not meant to give you medical advice.** If you have any questions about your medicines or the care you get for your epilepsy, be sure to talk to your doctor or nurse.

There are many different types of seizures. There are many different medicines used to control seizures. The medicine you take is one that your doctor thinks will be the best for your seizure type. Sometimes your doctor has to try more than one medicine before he or she finds what works best for you. Some people need to take more than one medicine to control their seizures.

Here are some suggestions that will help you take your medicines safely and correctly. Please remember, seizure control is your responsibility. You should follow these suggestions about your medicines in order to get the best possible control of your seizures.

## ALWAYS

- **Always take your medicine exactly as it is prescribed.** For example: If your medicine is prescribed 4 times-a-day, space your doses out over the hours you are awake. Most people take a 4 time-a-day dose at breakfast, lunch, supper and bedtime. Try to connect taking your drugs with a routine activity such as eating a meal or brushing your teeth. If you do shift work or have an irregular sleep pattern (for example you get up early during the week and sleep until noon on the weekends) discuss this with your doctor or nurse. We will help you set up a routine for taking your medicines to prevent problems or missed doses.

- **Always get your prescriptions refilled at least a week before your run out.**

It is very important that you do not run out of medicine. If you miss doses of your antiepileptic drugs you might have a seizure. Some pharmacies are reluctant to refill prescriptions early. If you have difficulty with this, try talking with your pharmacist and explain to him or her why this is important. Also, check to see how many refills you have left. Let your doctor know when you are down to your last refill.

- **Always report any side effects that last more than one week to your doctor.**

Your doctor should tell you what side effects to expect from your medicines. If you are not given this information, ask for it.

- **Always tell the doctor who is managing your seizures about all other drugs you take for any reason.**

Some drugs interact with each other. They can cause increased side effects or affect how well the drug will work for you. This includes any over-the-counter drugs. These are the kind of drugs you can buy at the drug store without a prescription.

- **Always tell any other doctor whom you are seeing about your antiepileptic medicines.**

This also includes your dentist. It is helpful to keep an up-to-date list of all medicines you take with you at all times.

- **Always be honest with your doctor.**

If you are missing doses of your medicine let him or her know. Whether this is due to forgetting to take your medicine or for any other reason, we will work with you to set up a schedule to correct this.

- **Always keep your medicine in a safe place, away from children.**

Children are naturally curious. If they see you taking medicines they may want to try them. When your child is old enough to understand, you can tell him or her that you take medicine to stay well. Make sure that you get your medicines with a child-proof cap and that you close the bottles tightly between doses.

- **Always keep a record of all your medicines.**

Buy a notebook and keep a list of all medicines you take. Put down the date you started it, what the dose was, any changes and, if it was stopped, why it was stopped. We will give you a copy of a medication record for you to use.

- **Always have drug levels and other blood tests done when your doctor orders them.**

Your doctor needs drug levels to check that you are getting the right amount of medicine for your seizures. Other blood tests are done to make sure the antiepileptic medicines are not causing you other physical problems. For example, some drugs affect the liver. Liver function tests show your doctor that the liver is working adequately and is not being harmed by your medicines.

- **Always keep your medicines in a dry place.**

Many people keep their medicines in the kitchen or bathroom because it is convenient and it helps them remember to take their medicines. These rooms can have high humidity because of sinks, showers, and cooking. Some medicines (like Tegretol® and Tegretol XR®) break down if they are kept in places with high humidity such as a bathroom or kitchen. It is best to keep your medicines in a dry place, like the bedroom, with the caps tightly sealed. If you use a drug box make sure each section is tightly closed. If you have trouble remembering to take your medicines a reminder note on the bathroom mirror or refrigerator door might help.

- **Always discuss any plans you have to get pregnant with your neurologist before you get pregnant.**

The medicines you take to control your seizures could affect your baby. It is most important that you have the best seizure control on the least amount of medicines BEFORE you get pregnant. Also, remember that daily folic acid, at least 0.4mg either in a multiple vitamin or by itself, will help prevent birth defects. Start taking this before you decide to get pregnant.

## **NEVER**

- **Never change the dose of your medicine.**

Discuss any concerns or problems you have with your medicine with your doctor. Do not take extra doses unless you have been specifically told to do so. Also, if you are having trouble with medicine side effects, let your doctor know about this.

- **Never stop taking a medicine suddenly.**

If you are being withdrawn from a medicine, follow the schedule exactly as it is written. A sudden withdrawal from an antiepileptic drug could result in status epilepticus (one seizure after another without recovery). This can be life threatening.

- **Never take anyone else's antiepileptic medicines.**

Your medicine and the dose you take were chosen for you by your doctor for your seizure type and your particular needs. People can have many types of seizures. What works for a friend may not work for you. In addition, it could cause you harm.

- **Never drive after you start a new drug.**

Driving may be restricted because of your seizures. In North Carolina it is your responsibility to report to the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) if you have episodes of loss of consciousness. If you do drive, it is best to wait a few days after you start a new medicine to make sure you won't have any side effects. Some medicines cause side effects like drowsiness when you first start to take them. This could affect your ability to drive safely. Always talk about a new medicine with your doctor and follow his or her suggestions about when it is safe to drive.

- **Never leave your medicines out loose on a cupboard or shelf.**

Some people put out a whole day's supply and take them as scheduled. This is especially dangerous if you have children around who might accidentally take them.

## **MISSED DOSES**

Everybody misses a dose of medicine now and then. If you are not sure what to do call your doctor or nurse and discuss this. It is also a good idea to talk to your doctor about this ahead of time and to have a plan ready in case you miss a dose. Make sure you ask about this when you are started on a new drug. How they are made up depends on what medicine you are taking, how often you take it in a day and why you've missed it. In general there are a few guidelines you can use for making up missed doses.

- For a once or twice a day dosing schedule, take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. Then get back on your normal schedule.
- For a 3 or 4 time a day dose schedule, take the missed dose as soon as possible and space out the remaining doses throughout the day. Resume your normal schedule the next day.
- For doses missed due to vomiting, repeat the dose if you vomit less than half an hour after the dose or if the pill comes back whole (like Depakote). If it has been more than half an hour, you don't need to repeat the dose. If the vomiting continues, especially in children, call your doctor and ask what you should do.

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**ALWAYS CHECK WITH YOUR DOCTOR TO SEE IF THIS PLAN WILL  
WORK FOR YOU AND YOUR PARTICULAR SITUATION.**

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## **REMEMBERING TO TAKE YOUR MEDICINES**

You are responsible for your seizure control. The best medicine will not control your seizures unless you take it regularly. Here are a few hints which might help you remember to take your drug.

- Buy a weekly pill container. They are available at every drug store. They hold a week's supply of pills and a quick look will show you if you've missed a dose.
- Write down your daily doses on a calendar and check them off as you take them.
- Connect taking your pills with routine daily activities like brushing your teeth or eating meals.
- Remind yourself of the positive effects of taking your drugs. When taken correctly they should work to control our seizures.

## **A WORD ABOUT VITAMINS**

Research studies have shown folate (folic acid) is helpful in preventing a number of problems, including birth defects and heart attacks. Some seizure medicines deplete your body of folate. Eating a healthy well balanced diet is the best way to make sure you are getting folate. Dietary sources include dark green leafy vegetables like spinach, broccoli, asparagus, kale and collard greens. Other sources include beef, pork and all types of liver. Taking a multiple vitamin which contains at least 400 mcg. (0.4mg) of folic acid is another way to replace what you might have lost. Any over-the-counter brands of vitamins, including store brands, are acceptable. Just check the label for the folic acid content or ask your pharmacist to help you select a brand. You can also buy plain folic acid tablets. They are in the vitamin section of your drug store.

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We know that buying antiepileptic drugs can be expensive and may be a financial strain for some patients.

- Most drug companies have a Patient Assistance Program which assists patients who do not have medical insurance which pays for drugs. Your doctor should have information about this.
- Membership in the Epilepsy Foundation of America (EFA) gives you access to reduced price brand name drugs through the AARP Pharmacy Service. This is a mail order service and the drugs are sent directly to your home. Call the EFA at 1-800-332-1000 for more information.

- In North Carolina, you can call the Epilepsy Information Service at Bowman Gray Medical School. Their number is 1-800-642-0500. Ms. Pat Gibson, ACSW is the Director of this program. They have an Epilepsy Medication Fund to help people who cannot pay for their medicine and have no other way to get it. Call them for more information about this program. Because the funds for this program are limited, please try the patient assistance programs first.

## **TRAVELING**

By planning ahead you can have a safe and enjoyable trip.

- Make sure you have enough medicine to last the whole time you will be away. For legal reasons you should always carry your medicines in the pharmacy labeled bottles in which they were dispensed. It is also a good idea to carry along extra prescriptions so you can get a refill if your medicines are lost. If you have your prescriptions filled at a chain pharmacy (like Revco, etc.) which has branches in other cities and states, they may be able to refill your prescription for you if you are out of town and run out. However, don't rely on this.
- If you are flying, always carry your medicines on the plane with you in a purse or carry-on bag. NEVER put them in your checked-in bags.
- For foreign travel, carry a copy of all your prescriptions written in their chemical or generic form. The brand names of antiepileptic drugs are different in other countries. You would have a very difficult time getting an emergency supply of drugs if you lose yours, especially if they are written in the brand name form. For example, the chemical name for Tegretol® is carbamazepine; for Dilantin® it is phenytoin. Also, some drugs such as phenobarbital are considered controlled substances and you might need to show a custom's officer that you are in legal possession of the drug. These prescriptions must be in original form, signed by the doctor. Copies are not considered to be legal.

## **CONCLUSION**

Please remember, in order to get the best medical control for your seizures you need to have a good working relationship with your doctor. Please discuss any specific questions with him or her. Also, please feel free to contact the Epilepsy Nurse Clinician at 919-~~966-0205~~ <sup>843-1839</sup> for general questions about your medications.

written by: Susan L. Lannon, BS, RN  
Epilepsy Nurse Clinician  
Department of Neurology  
UNC Chapel Hill

Bradley V. Vaughn, MD  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Neurology  
UNC Chapel Hill  
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