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Adherence Made Easy

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A quarter of all cancer patients currently use oral medications to manage their cancer or side effects from the disease and its treatment, according to a national study by Harris Interactive. Of those, a third admitted they didn't always follow their doctors' directions and more than half said they forgot to take their medicine. In a busy world, it can be hard to take a moment to remember a little pill, but it can be vital. Below are a few things you can do to help jog your memory.

Understand what you are taking. If you know the short- and long-term effects of a drug, you may be more motivated to take it regularly.

Make a self-contract. Think it out and purposefully decide to take the medication for clear reasons and goals.

Fit it into your routine. Take it at breakfast, before you go for your morning walk, or after you put the kids to bed. It is easier to remember to take a pill when you brush your teeth each night than at 8 p.m. sharp. If you plan on taking it with a meal, check with your doctor about taking your medication with food.

Write it down. If you are taking multiple medications, keep a list of what you are taking and when. A clear list is also good to have when you talk to your doctor or in case of an emergency.

Know what to do if you miss a dose. What's the impact on effectiveness or side effects if you miss one pill? Should you take it later the same day or wait until the next day?

Use your senses. Many people use sorted weeklong pill boxes to keep things straight. Put it where you will see it to give yourself a visual cue. Set an alarm or a beeping wristwatch to get your attention.

Get a gadget. If you prefer something high-tech, gizmos are available with alarms, pre-sorted pill sets, and automatic dispensers. In June, the Food and Drug Administration approved the Electronic Medication Management Assistant (EMMA), which stores and dispenses medication and lets your doctor monitor your day-to-day well-being, including allowing him or her to adjust doses and medication times.

Think long-term. The side effects may not be pleasant, but take the long-term effects into account. Is it worth it to feel tired now if it keeps cancer at bay?

Be honest. If you have a problem—strained finances or a distressing side effect—talk to your doctor. If your physician isn't aware you aren't taking your medicine, he or she is probably wondering why things aren't going as hoped. In addition to helping alleviate side effects, your doctor might know how to help you afford the drug.

Plan for travel. Make sure you have enough of each medicine and pack them in your carry-on. Also take extra pills in case your plans change. Take a copy of the prescription in case you run out while traveling. Even if you don't have the prescription, keep a list of the medications you are on as well as contact information for your doctor, pharmacist, insurance agency, and clinic.

Know yourself. If you know you are likely to forget, recruit your doctor, a friend, or family member to call you periodically and ask about your medicine. If you know that you always eat dry cereal in the morning, keep your medicine or a reminder near the box. Or write a note on your mirror so you see it first thing. There is no one "right" way to manage your medicine—it just matters that you do manage it.