

Children on Medication: The Basics Every Parent and Child Should Know

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Medicating children is a very different process than adults. When a child has been prescribed a medication, usually parents are cautious and concerned. Having a child on medication is the joint responsibility of parent, child, and physician. In the best circumstance it is a working partnership where there are open lines of communication. Usually it is the parent who initiates an office visit to discuss medication, but it is the child who has to take it everyday. This gives the parent the added burden of being directly responsible for their child's health and well being on medicine.

It is important for the process to be therapeutic from the start. This begins with a clear understanding about the medication, what can be expected, and what are the responsibilities of parent and child. I use the word "responsibilities" very literally, because just as a physician has the obligation to obtain informed consent and discuss risks, benefits, and side effects, the patient (if it is a minor child the parents), also has an obligation to the physician. Some of these responsibilities include: to follow up as scheduled, monitor for side effects, follow directions exactly, ask before combining the medication with other medicines or supplements, and being mindful of the supply one has and not run out precipitously.

Sometimes these issues are not discussed in detail. Other physicians provide written instructions. However, it is vital that both patients and parents have a good understanding about their prescriptions, especially when it comes to the use of psychotropic medications (for example ADHD, anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications). Any child, capable of pronouncing the name of their medication should know what their medicine is called, and why they are taking it. I typically discuss this in an age appropriate style with any child or adolescent I have on medication. A child incapable of this, who may be on medication, should have a means of being identified

through a bracelet, id tag, etc. Parents and caregivers should know the name, spelling, and dosage of the medication. This is important to have available not only for emergencies but in cases where it may be necessary to use another medication and it needs to be determined whether or not there may be an interaction.

Parents should be sure to schedule routine follow up with their physician. Once a child is stable on a medication there is a natural tendency to get comfortable with having the prescriptions and skip regular follow up visits. However, these visits are not only important to assess a child for any side effects, benefits, or different treatment options but also to be able to communicate any changes in the medication's use or effectiveness that may have developed in the interim. In today's world medications are monitored constantly and prescribing practices change frequently. Look at the example of some of the warnings regarding suicide and antidepressants, as well as concerns with stimulants and heart problems.

The length of time a child is on medications should also be reevaluated periodically at intervals of nine months to a year. Without systematic follow up this can fall through the cracks. Also there are situations where laboratory evaluations, blood pressure, weight and other parameters should be monitored more closely.

Finally, it is important to always respect that medications can change in their effectiveness over time, causing new untoward effects or losing their effectiveness all together. Children in particular are constantly growing and developing. There are physical, metabolic, hormonal, and psychological changes happening whether a child is on medication or not. Once a child is on a medication we need to be particularly vigilant about monitoring and adjusting that medication to keep up with these changes.

Lastly, always be honest and open with the physician prescribing the medication. Sometimes dosages are changed or medication is given differently than it was prescribed putting everyone at risk. Most physicians will listen to your concerns and suggestions, but cannot help if they don't have an accurate understanding of what is actually occurring. I value partnership with my patients which benefits everyone involved. I take very seriously the responsibility of medicating a child and know that each parent does too.