Is it okay to split tablets?

Patients respond differently to medications, and the factors contributing to those differences include the severity of a condition, the patient’s ability to absorb and breakdown the medication, age, and body size. To meet individual needs, most medications come in different strengths. Interestingly, the cost of a medication is not linked to the amount of active ingredients in the tablet or capsule. For example, 10 mg, 20 mg, and 40 mg tablets often are sold at the same price.

What is the rationale for pill splitting?
Some tablets are scored and are, thus, intended for splitting. Splitting other tablets has one major purpose: to save money. If a person is prescribed a daily dose of a costly 20 mg tablet, there are two options: fill the prescription and pay the full price for a supply of 20 mg tablets, or get a prescription for half the number of 40 mg tablets. If the costs for the 20 mg and 40 mg tablets are the same, the savings is 50 percent (not counting the cost of dispensing). Many health plans, including the one for the U.S. Veterans Affairs, have substantial pill-splitting programs and have been able to reduce their budget for medications substantially.

For consumers with an insurance plan that includes prescription drug benefits, the main beneficiary of a pill splitting program is the health plan itself. The saving to the consumer is limited to up to half of the co-payment. Make sure that you understand the insurance benefits and find out if pill-splitting would work for you. A disadvantage of pill splitting is that monitoring of drug use gets more complicated.

A recent survey reported that patients participating in pill-splitting programs would like to get their share of the cost-savings. Almost 90 percent of certain health plan members said they would be willing to continue splitting their cholesterol-reducing medications (statins) in exchange for a 50 percent reduction in their co-payment. Almost 60 percent would even be satisfied by smaller savings of $5 to $10 per prescription. A small percentage of the respondents, however, indicated that no amount of money would make them split their medications.

Is pill splitting complicated?
Pill splitters are available at your pharmacy for about $5. They are simple to use for most patients, and although tablets come in different shapes, most people can split them into two halves of similar size. Patients who cannot use
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the splitter as intended because of poor dexterity or other reasons may seek assistance. Some states have authorized pharmacists to split pills for customers.

**What is the downside of pill splitting?**

First, splitting is not an option for capsules. Second, some tablets have a special time-release coating and should not be split. Third, the two halves may be of unequal size, something that pharmaceutical industry representatives bring up as a major objection. However, small fluctuations in the blood level from day to day have not been shown to matter medically. Also, remember that the bigger half will make up for the smaller half. The amount of a medication given over two days is identical whether you split it or not.

Pill splitting is not recommended for special treatments that require a fairly constant blood concentration, such as certain medications for epilepsy. We also discourage splitting the medication twice. Thus, do not split an 80 mg pill twice to get four pieces with an average of 20 mg.

### Key messages

- Tablet splitting is a common method to reduce the cost of medications.
- It is an option when different dose strengths of a medication are similarly priced.
- If you have prescription drug benefits, find out if pill-splitting is an option for you.
- Patients support pill-splitting programs if offered a share of the savings.
- Your pharmacist can tell you whether your medications are suitable for pill splitting.