What are useful strategies to improve adherence?

Any person prescribed long-term treatment is likely to find out it is not easy to remember taking every tablet or capsule as recommended. People typically take less than half the prescribed doses. With so many things going on in our lives, it is very easy to forget. The situation is much easier with medications for symptomatic relief; the headache or the joint pain serves as a reminder. When the symptoms recur, it is time for a new tablet. For medications intended to treat a non-symptomatic condition or prevent a complication that may or may not occur in the future, there are often no reminders or cues.

**What is the advantage of good adherence?**

For a treatment to be most effective, the body needs a constant supply of the medication. For many medications, it is possible to measure their concentrations in the blood. The purpose of the dosing, whether once a day or three times a day, is to keep a fairly constant supply or blood level over 24 hours. The once-a-day medication should be taken at the same time every day, while the three times-a-day medication ought to be taken every eight hours of the day. Modest deviations from this schedule are unimportant. In the next chapter, we discuss what you should do if you mistakenly skip a dose.

**What are manufacturers doing to improve adherence?**

The manufacturers of your medications have the same goal as you: hoping that your medications will alleviate, cure, or prevent your conditions. They know that it is much easier to adhere to a once-a-day regimen than a three times-a-day regimen. Thus, they try to produce more long-acting medications. Many medications today are formulated to control the release of the active ingredients over the day. These are the so-called slow-release or extended-release medications. Interestingly, some patients taking a medication three times a day show good adherence, while some using a once-daily formulation are poor adherers. The reason for this difference in adherence is unclear.

The manufacturers may also offer medications that you don’t have to take every day. Some of these are injectable. Delivery of medications through the skin is another potential solution, as the medication is added to a patch that can deliver it over a week or so. It sounds like a convenient way of delivering
medications, but it does have major problems. Some patients do not absorb adequate amounts over time, while others absorb too much. We discourage the use of patches.

**What could you do to be a good adherer?**
First, it has to become a high priority to take your medications as prescribed. For those on five or more medications, you should ask your physician whether you need all of them (see Chapter 36). You could ask whether there are long-acting formulations available to replace any short-acting medications you are taking.

Most of us need reminders or cues in order to take our medications as prescribed. Put your medication bottles in a visible place, such as on your nightstand or kitchen table. Reminders on the refrigerator door are also helpful. You could also ask other family members to remind you. A more extreme method is setting an alarm to ring when it is time to take your medication.

A highly recommended method is to buy a pill box at your pharmacy. It allows you to divide up by day all the medications you are prescribed during a seven-day period. If you can’t remember whether you took your morning dose of a medication, you can easily find out by checking the compartment of the pill box for that day.

A new approach that has shown promise is the “talk back” method. It is based on the knowledge that patients, on average, have forgotten half of what they were told by their physician when they leave his or her office. When patients are asked to repeat what the physician said, they remember much more. For example, the physician would say, “Mrs. Jones, you have high blood pressure or hypertension.” Mrs. Jones would then say, “Doctor, you told me
that I have high blood pressure or hypertension.” The physician would say, “You should take one tablet of this new medication every night before you go to bed.” Mrs. Jones would say, “I should take one tablet of the new medication every night before I go to bed.” This approach is simple and may be a bit time-consuming, but seems to improve adherence.

Key messages

- Being able to remember to take your prescribed medications can be a challenge.
- It is an advantage to have simple (once-a-day) dosing regimens.
- Reminders such as weekly pill boxes are highly recommended.
- Medication patches may facilitate adherence, but absorption is unpredictable and not recommended.