

Understanding NICE guidance

Information for people who use NHS services

You and your prescribed medicines: enabling and supporting patients to make informed decisions

NICE 'clinical guidelines' advise the NHS on caring for people and the treatments they should receive.

This booklet is about enabling patients to make informed choices by involving and supporting them in decisions about prescribed medicines. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) to the NHS in England and Wales. It is written for patients but it may also be useful for their families or carers.

The booklet aims to help you understand how healthcare professionals should enable you to make informed choices by involving and supporting you in decisions about prescribed medicines. There are examples of questions you could ask your healthcare professional. In this booklet 'medicines' is used as a general term to refer to prescribed medicines and includes tablets, syrups, ointments, creams, eyedrops and suppositories.

In the NHS in England and Wales, medicines can be prescribed by doctors and by some nurses and pharmacists who have special training. Because this guidance applies to all members of the healthcare team who prescribe and review medicines, this booklet refers to 'your healthcare professional' throughout.

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The advice in the NICE guideline covers:

- adults, including people with disabilities, people from all cultures and those whose first language is not English.

It does not specifically look at:

- children and young people. However, the recommendations may be considered for children and young people if they are thought able to take part in decisions on prescribed medicines.

Your care

All NICE clinical guidelines state that you have the right to be fully informed about your condition and possible treatments and to make decisions in partnership with your healthcare team.

All healthcare professionals should treat you with respect, sensitivity and understanding. If you agree, your family and carers should have the chance to be involved in decisions about your care. Family members and carers also have the right to the information and support they need in their roles as carers.

If people are unable to understand a particular issue or are not able to make decisions for themselves, healthcare professionals should follow the advice that the Department of Health has produced about this. You can find this by going to the Department of Health website (www.dh.gov.uk/consent). Your healthcare professional should also follow the code of practice for the Mental Capacity Act. For more information about this, visit www.publicguardian.gov.uk

Being involved in decisions about your medicines

Almost everyone is given a prescription for a medicine at some time, but some people don't use their medicines as prescribed. Sometimes this is because they are worried about the medicine and don't want to use it, sometimes they don't understand why they need it and sometimes they have practical problems (such as fitting medicine-taking into their routine).

Healthcare professionals can help you as a patient to make choices about treatment by involving and supporting you in decisions about medicines:

- before any medicine is prescribed
- over the course of your treatment.

Improved communication

Good communication between patients and healthcare professionals is important, but some patients find it difficult to communicate with their healthcare professionals. To make sure that you have the chance to be involved in decisions about medicines your healthcare professional should adapt their consultation style to your needs. They should check whether you have any special communication needs such as hearing or sight problems, or difficulties with reading or speaking English, or a physical or learning disability. They should take these needs into account and might use pictures, symbols, large print, a different language, an interpreter or advocate to help you understand information about your condition and possible treatments.

Finding out about your condition and possible treatments

Healthcare professionals have a duty to help patients make an informed choice about treatments by explaining the likely benefits and risks. Your healthcare professional should encourage you to ask questions about your condition and possible treatments and should ask if you have any concerns.

You should ask questions about your condition and possible treatments and you should tell your healthcare professional about any concerns.

Questions you might ask about medicines

- What are the benefits of this medicine?
- What are the risks in using this medicine?
- What effect might the medicine have on my symptoms and everyday life?
- How long will it take to have an effect?
- Are there any side effects associated with this medicine?
- What other treatments are available?
- What support can you offer me if I decide not to take any medicines?

Your healthcare professional should explain the possible benefits from a treatment and openly discuss the pros and cons.

They should offer you information about a medicine before prescribing it. Information should be clear and easy to understand and should meet your needs. Your healthcare professional should talk about the information with you and make sure you've understood it. If you are staying in hospital you have the right to the same type of information about your medicines.

You should ask your healthcare professional for any information you need to make a decision about prescribed medicines.

Information about medicines

Some people want to know more about their medicines than others. The information offered to you about medicines should meet your needs and is likely to include:

- what the medicine is
- how the medicine is likely to improve your condition
- possible side effects, and what you should do if you think you have them
- how to use the medicine
- what to do if you miss a dose
- whether you might need another course and how to get a further supply.

You may be offered other information if you or your healthcare professional thinks this might be helpful.

The NICE guidance says your healthcare professional should suggest where you can find more information and support (for example, from a website such as NHS Choices [www.nhs.uk]).

Making a decision

Your healthcare professional should make sure that you have the chance to be involved in decisions about medicines so that you can make an informed choice about your treatment. They shouldn't assume that you would prefer a particular treatment. They should talk with you about your preferences and what you know about a medicine, and about any worries (such as side effects or becoming dependent). They should ask you what you hope the treatment will achieve.

Your healthcare professional should understand that you might have different ideas from them about the benefits, risks and side effects of a medicine. They should know that you might not want to take too many medicines, that you might want to talk about alternative therapies and what might happen if you don't take the medicines suggested. They should accept that you have the right to refuse a medicine or to stop taking a medicine, even if they think this could mean that your condition might get worse. Together, you and your healthcare professional should decide whether a medicine should or should not be prescribed.

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Getting the most from your medicines

Getting your medicines at the pharmacy or dispensary

The healthcare professional should check that you have all the information you need about your medicine when the medicine is dispensed (this may be at the hospital pharmacy, local chemist or dispensing doctors' surgery). Most medicines come with a patient information leaflet (called a PIL). If you're worried about anything you read in this leaflet you should discuss this with a healthcare professional.

Reviewing medicines

If you are taking several medicines over a long period, a healthcare professional should talk with you about your medicines on a regular basis. This may be called a 'medicines review'. The NICE guidance says that a healthcare professional should regularly review decisions about medicines. During the medicines review your healthcare professional should ask you again how you view your condition and treatment and they will probably offer you some more information.

Your healthcare professional should understand that people sometimes don't take their medicines.

They should ask if you have any worries about your medicines (for example, about side effects or becoming dependent) or any practical problems (such as opening bottles or packets, or the costs of prescriptions). Your healthcare professional should understand that people sometimes don't take their medicines. They may ask whether you've missed any doses recently, cut down on the dose or stopped the medicine and then started it again. This is a good opportunity for you to talk about any concerns and how your healthcare professional can help you overcome any problems. For example, some patients may want to talk about:

- fitting medicines into their daily routine
- cutting down or stopping medicines they've been taking for a long time
- choosing between medicines if they think they're taking too many.

If you have a particular practical problem that makes it difficult to use your medicine, your healthcare professional might make the following suggestions.

Some possible suggestions for overcoming practical problems

- Making a note when you take your medicine
- Using a box with different compartments to help you remember whether you've taken your tablets
- Special packaging that you can open more easily
- Fitting your medicine-taking into your daily routine
- Different ways of paying for your medicines to reduce costs

It is very important that your healthcare professional knows about any concerns you might have about side effects. They should offer you the chance to talk again about the benefits, side effects and long-term effects of your medicines and how you would like to deal with side effects. They may make some suggestions for dealing with side effects.

Some possible suggestions for dealing with side effects

- Adjusting the dosage (perhaps reducing the strength of the medicine)
- Changing the time when you take each dose
- Changing to another medicine with a different risk of side effects

Your healthcare professional should encourage you (perhaps with the help of your family) to keep an up-to-date list of all medicines you are taking. The list should include prescribed medicines, those you've bought, and vitamin, mineral or herbal supplements. If you have allergic reactions or harmful effects from any medicines or supplements you should also make a note of these.

The medicines review (see page 8) is an opportunity for you to think again about your treatment. At the medicines review your healthcare professional should help you to make informed choices by involving and supporting you in any decisions about medicines.

Making sure healthcare professionals involved in your care know about your condition and treatments

It is important that all healthcare professionals involved in your care know about your condition and treatments and there should be good communication between healthcare professionals. For example, on discharge from hospital you and your GP or other healthcare professional should be given written information, including:

- your diagnosis
- a list of all medicines you should be taking
- medicines that were started
- medicines that were stopped, with reasons
- medicines that should be continued and for how long
- any harmful effects or allergies
- any problems you might have with taking your medicines and any action taken (for example, use of a box with different compartments).

More information

NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk) may be a good place to find out more. Your local patient advice and liaison service (usually known as 'PALS') may be able to give you more information and support. You should also contact PALS if you are unhappy with the treatment you are offered, but you should talk about your care with a member of your healthcare team first. If your local PALS is not able to help you, they should refer you to your local independent complaints advocacy service.

About NICE

NICE produces guidance (advice) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider the best available evidence on the condition and treatments, the views of patients and carers and the experiences of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals working in the field. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance

This booklet and other versions of this guideline aimed at healthcare professionals are available at www.nice.org.uk/CG76

You can order printed copies of this booklet from NICE publications (phone 0845 003 7783 or email publications@nice.org.uk and quote reference N1760).

We encourage NHS and voluntary organisations to use text from this booklet in their own information about enabling and supporting patients to make informed decisions about prescribed medicines.