

## Have you got it?

### Most adults need help with health instructions

A 2003 report by the *National Center for Education Statistics* found that most adults need help to understand information about their health and medicines.<sup>1</sup> This has nothing to do with a person's ability to read or write. In fact, people who don't understand health information are often highly intelligent and skilled in other areas that might be difficult for medical people to understand. It's just that health information is often explained and written in a way that is different from how non-medical people talk and think.

Many people who thought they knew how to take or give medicines safely later found out that they had misunderstood the directions. For instance,

many young mothers who volunteered to participate in a test could not accurately state their child's correct dose after reading the label for **Tylenol (acetaminophen)** drops or liquid.

People who take **Coumadin (warfarin)** to prevent blood clots have also misunderstood the directions for taking their medicine, especially since the dose may be changed. One man continued to take a 5 mg tablet each day, even though his doctor had lowered his dose to 2.5 mg daily. After taking a new prescription for the lower dose to the pharmacy, the man mistakenly thought each tablet now contained 2.5 mg of **Coumadin**. He did not notice that the bottle had 5 mg tablets in it, and the

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### When is "EZ" too easy?

The makers of **Tylenol (acetaminophen)** have designed a new bottle with a cap that is easy to remove. The bottle is made for adults who have trouble using their hands, but children can also open it easily. The bright red, sugar coated tablets are appealing to children because they look like candy.

Recently, a 3-year-old child was able to open a bottle and eat a large number of **Tylenol Extra Strength EZ** tabs. After she was taken to the hospital, her blood tests showed that she had eaten about 15 tablets. The child needed to



Tablets look like candy and come in an "EZ" open container.

be placed on a ventilator (machine to help breathing) for a week. Thankfully, she recovered and is now at home.

The company is once again using child-resistant containers for this medicine. However, "EZ" open bottles are still used for other medicines. If you have any of these "EZ" open bottles, be sure they are safely stored away from children. Remember, children can reach high cabinets. So, put these medicines in a locked or child-resistant cabinet. Children also mimic what they see, so don't take your medicine in front of them.

## Check it out!

To best understand your instructions for taking medicines:

✓ **Speak up.** Bring all your medicines with you when you visit your doctor. Ask your doctor to review the reason for each one and the directions for use. Also ask your doctor to write the reason for taking each medicine on any new prescription.

✓ **Repeat back.** Repeat your understanding of the instructions back to your doctor (or pharmacist, nurse) to be sure there is no confusion.

✓ **Take notes.** Write down important information as you receive it. A form specifically for this (**Make Notes & Take Notes**) can be found on the Internet ([www.talkaboutrx.org/documents/make\\_notes\\_bw.pdf](http://www.talkaboutrx.org/documents/make_notes_bw.pdf)).

✓ **Bring a family member.** A friend or family member can help you ask questions and take notes. They can also translate directions if you would better understand the information in your primary language.

✓ **Verify.** When you pick up your prescription, take the medicine out of the bag and read the label. If you have questions, ask your pharmacist.

✓ **Learn more.** Read the drug information leaflet that comes with your medicine. If you still have questions, don't let embarrassment stop you from asking your pharmacist or doctor, even after you get home.


**Too much of a good thing? Excessive antibiotics**

Many parents specifically ask their child's doctor for a prescription for an antibiotic when their child has a cold or sore throat. In fact, almost 75% of children's antibiotic prescriptions are related to these conditions. However, most of these infections are caused by viruses that do NOT get better with antibiotics. Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses.

Taking antibiotics when they are not needed can cause less harmful bacteria in the body to grow stronger. Then, a more powerful antibiotic will be needed if those bacteria cause an illness. These toughened germs can spread to other people, even those who have not taken antibiotics unnecessarily.

A few years ago, the Centers for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration began to warn consumers about this serious health problem. The program, called "Get Smart," includes written materials and a poster (to the right) that covers common upper respiratory infections that are NOT helped by taking antibiotics.


If you or a family member have a virus, ask your doctor or pharmacist about other ways to help you feel better. Taking antibiotics only when you really need them protects your health, your family's health, and the health of people in the community where you live.



**GET SMART**  
Know When Antibiotics Work

**Get Smart.** Take a look at this chart to find out which upper respiratory infections are usually caused by viruses—germs that are not killed by antibiotics. Talk with your doctor about ways to feel better when you are sick. Ask what you should look for at home that might mean you are developing an infection for which antibiotics might be appropriate.

Illness	Usual cause		Antibiotic Needed
	Virus	Bacteria	
<b>Cold</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>
<b>Flu</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>
<b>Chest Cold</b> (in otherwise healthy children and adults)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>
<b>Sore Throats</b> (except strep)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>
<b>Bronchitis</b> (in otherwise healthy children and adults)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>
<b>Runny Nose</b> (with green or yellow mucus)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>
<b>Fluid in the Middle Ear</b> (otitis media with effusion)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>



Source: [www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/community/campaign\\_materials/Black-White/VirusBacteriaChart\(BW\).pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/community/campaign_materials/Black-White/VirusBacteriaChart(BW).pdf)

**Health instructions** continued

directions said to take a ½ tablet each day. He was later hospitalized to prevent serious bleeding. In another case, a woman told us that she made a mistake with a new medicine because she was unable to listen carefully and write things down at the same time.

Misunderstandings can occur with *all* people, not just the elderly or uneducated. Actually, the American Medical Association<sup>2</sup> reports that:

- Almost half of the people with chronic illnesses do not understand their diseases and medicines
- Only half of all people take their medicines correctly

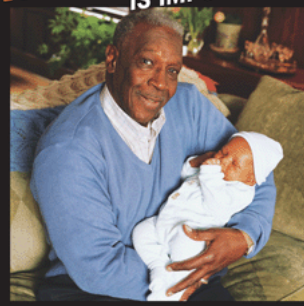
■ Misunderstandings about health and medicines have increased US health costs by \$73 billion.

People want and need simple and clear directions when it comes to taking care of their health. See **Check it out!** (page 1) for ways to be sure you understand your medicine instructions.

**References:** 1) Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, Paulsen C. *The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NECS 2006-483). 2006; US Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. 2) Weiss DB, et al. *Health Literacy. A Manual for Clinicians*. 2003; American Medical Association Foundation and American Medical Association. Accessed at: [www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/367/healthlitclinicians.pdf](http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/367/healthlitclinicians.pdf).


**Reminder:**  
**Get your flu shot!**

More people die from the flu than from any other vaccine-preventable disease—36,000 people each year in the US! The flu shot protects you and those around you who could become very sick if they catch the flu.



**STAYING HEALTHY IS IMPORTANT TO ME.**

**My doctor said I should get a flu shot to protect myself AND the ones I love. So I did.**



For more information, ask your healthcare provider or call 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636) Website: [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)

Contact Information



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▶ Brand name medicines appear in green; generic medicines appear in red.