

## **An inquisitive patient is a safe patient Persistence pays off**

If you are hospitalized, nurses will typically give you the medicine your doctor has prescribed. But if the medicine the nurse brings to you doesn't seem right, it might be that an error has happened. You may be hesitant to speak up about the potential problem. You may believe your doctor and nurse know more about medicine than you do. But in some cases, your instincts may be right, as in the example that follows.

When a hospitalized patient with diabetes suggested that 85 units of **insulin** was too much, the nurse rechecked the doctor's orders and the patient's medicine record. Both showed that 85 units had been prescribed. The patient still felt the dose was wrong, so the nurse called the doctor. It turned out, the patient was correct. When the patient was first admitted to the hospital, the doctor had looked up the patient's **insulin** dose in her medical record from a previous hospital admission. He had then prescribed the same dose in the medical record—85 units. But the record in the doctor's office showed that the patient's **insulin** dose had been lowered since the last time she was in the hospital.

In this case, the patient's expressed concerns led to the discovery of the error. But if a patient speaks up about a concern, and an error is not found right away, he or she should persist if something still feels wrong. A tragic example follows in which a patient's concerns about her medicine were not fully checked.

The patient told her nurses and doctors that she felt something was wrong after 2 days of treatment with **cyclophosphamide**, a powerful medicine used to treat cancer. This was not the first time the patient had received this medicine to treat her cancer; but this time the medicine seemed very different. The nurses and doctors had initially checked the medicine and reassured her that it was correct. But, the patient actually received a large overdose. She was supposed to receive 1 gram of the medicine each day for 4 days. Instead, she received 4 grams of the medicine for 4 days. The doctors and nurses had misunderstood the formula used to determine the dose. Sadly, the patient died as a result of the error.

Fatal mistakes with medicine are rare. But one of the sad truths of deadly medication errors is that, in many cases, the patient or family member felt something was wrong but failed to speak up or was convinced by others that there was no problem. Ask questions, especially if there are clues that a mistake may have been made. Don't be satisfied if an answer doesn't make sense or resolve your concerns. Ask for more information, and insist that your concerns be investigated. If you have a feeling that something is wrong, you may be right!

See **Check it out!** to the right for information about a **Speak Up** campaign that encourages consumers to ask questions, and to ask again if you don't understand the answers.

### **Check it out!**

The Joint Commission (TJC) and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have initiated a **Speak Up** campaign ([www.jointcommission.org/GeneralPublic/Speak+Up/](http://www.jointcommission.org/GeneralPublic/Speak+Up/)) to encourage consumers to become informed in their healthcare by doing the following:

- ✓ **Speak up** if you have questions or concerns, and if you don't understand, ask again. It's your body and you have a right to know.
- ✓ **Pay attention** to the care you are receiving. Make sure you're getting the right treatment and medication by the right healthcare professionals. Don't assume anything.
- ✓ **Educate yourself** about your diagnosis, the medical tests you are undergoing, and your treatment plan.
- ✓ **Ask** a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate.
- ✓ **Know** what medications you take and why you take them. Medication errors are the most common healthcare errors.
- ✓ **Use** a hospital, clinic, surgery center, or other type of healthcare organization that undergoes rigorous evaluation against established quality and safety standards, like those provided by TJC.
- ✓ **Participate** in all decisions about your treatment. **You** are the center of your healthcare team.

**Taking action on asthma: A tool for parents**

Children with asthma are absent from school nearly 8 days each year with asthma-related symptoms, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation. The National Institutes of Health released guidelines to help parents prevent flare-ups. These guidelines include a color-coded asthma action plan that the child's doctor can complete and give to parents to help control their child's asthma (see page 3).

The action plan includes three color zones that describe the medicines that should be taken and when to contact the doctor if symptoms occur. The "green zone" (**Doing Well**) action plan is used when the child has no asthma symptoms and only needs to take medicines that help prevent the asthma symptoms from flaring up. The "yellow zone" (**Asthma is Getting Worse**) action plan is used when the child is experiencing mild symptoms such as a cough, wheezing, or chest tightness, but he or

she can still do some of his or her usual activities. A quick-relief inhaler along with long-term control medicine are needed. The "red zone" (**Medical Alert!**) action plan is used when the child experiences more serious symptoms, such as severe shortness of breath and inability to carry out usual activities. The child needs a quick-relief inhaler, an immediate call to the doctor, and transportation to a hospital.

Having a written action plan and knowing when to use asthma inhalers can help parents become more confident about controlling their child's asthma. Parents should also share their child's asthma action plan with the child's school nurse and childcare provider. More about the asthma action plan, which includes a list of asthma triggers on the back of the plan, can be found at: [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/asthma\\_actplan.pdf](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/asthma_actplan.pdf).

**research shows...**



In any given week, four out of five adults will take a prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medicine. The more information you have about your medicine, the better able you will be to use it properly. But when it comes to prescription medicine, a 2006 study<sup>1</sup> at the University of California in Los Angeles showed that patients left the doctor's office without at least one of these key pieces of information about their new medicine:

- The name of the medicine
- The reason for taking the medicine
- How much should be taken, and when and how it should be taken
- How long it should be used
- Bad side effects.

One out of four times, doctors did not tell patients the specific name of the medicine. They explained the purpose of the medicine in most cases, but only discussed bad side effects for 35 percent of new prescriptions. Just one in three patients were told how long to take the medicine. Only half of the time, doctors told patients the number of tablets to take and when to take them.

When you visit your doctor, bring a list of the medicines you take, including prescription and OTC medicines, vitamins, and herbals. If your doctor prescribes or suggests a new medicine, ask questions so you are sure you know how to take your medicine correctly. Bring a notebook or family member with you, and write down the doctor's instructions. If you still have a question, ask your pharmacist when you purchase your medicine.

**Reference:** 1) Tarn DM, Heritage J, Patemiti DA, et al. Physician communication when prescribing new medications. *Arch Intern Med.* 2006;166:1855-1862.

**Get your flu shot!**

Influenza is a very serious disease. Each year, it causes about 36,000 deaths and 200,000 hospitalizations. The flu season runs from November through April, so it is best to get your vaccine in October or early November. However, you can still benefit from getting the vaccine after November, even if the flu is present in your community. The vaccine is available as a shot or a nasal-spray that is inhaled through the nose. Once you get vaccinated, it takes about 2 weeks for your body to make antibodies to guard against getting the flu. Protect yourself and your family by getting a flu vaccine!

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

# Asthma Action Plan

For: \_\_\_\_\_ Doctor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Doctor's Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital/Emergency Department Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

## GREEN ZONE

### Doing Well

- No cough, wheeze, chest tightness, or shortness of breath during the day or night
- Can do usual activities

**And, if a peak flow meter is used,**

**Peak flow:** more than \_\_\_\_\_  
(80 percent or more of my best peak flow)

My best peak flow is: \_\_\_\_\_

Before exercise \_\_\_\_\_



2 or  4 puffs

5 to 60 minutes before exercise

Take these long-term control medicines each day (include an anti-inflammatory).

Medicine \_\_\_\_\_

How much to take \_\_\_\_\_

When to take it \_\_\_\_\_



## YELLOW ZONE

### Asthma Is Getting Worse

- Cough, wheeze, chest tightness, or shortness of breath, or
- Waking at night due to asthma, or
- Can do some, but not all, usual activities

**-Or-**

**Peak flow:** \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_  
(50 to 79 percent of my best peak flow)



**First** Add: quick-relief medicine—and keep taking your GREEN ZONE medicine.

\_\_\_\_\_ (short-acting beta<sub>2</sub>-agonist)  2 or  4 puffs, every 20 minutes for up to 1 hour  
 Nebulizer, once

**If your symptoms (and peak flow, if used) return to GREEN ZONE after 1 hour of above treatment:**



**Second** Continue monitoring to be sure you stay in the green zone.

**-Or-**

**If your symptoms (and peak flow, if used) do not return to GREEN ZONE after 1 hour of above treatment:**

Take: \_\_\_\_\_ (short-acting beta<sub>2</sub>-agonist)  2 or  4 puffs or  Nebulizer

Add: \_\_\_\_\_ (oral steroid) \_\_\_\_\_ mg per day For \_\_\_\_\_ (3–10) days

Call the doctor  before/  within \_\_\_\_\_ hours after taking the oral steroid.

## RED ZONE

### Medical Alert!

- Very short of breath, or
- Quick-relief medicines have not helped, or
- Cannot do usual activities, or
- Symptoms are same or get worse after 24 hours in Yellow Zone

**-Or-**

**Peak flow:** less than \_\_\_\_\_  
(50 percent of my best peak flow)

Take this medicine:

\_\_\_\_\_ (short-acting beta<sub>2</sub>-agonist)  4 or  6 puffs or  Nebulizer

\_\_\_\_\_ (oral steroid) \_\_\_\_\_ mg

**Then call your doctor NOW.** Go to the hospital or call an ambulance if:

- You are still in the red zone after 15 minutes AND
- You have not reached your doctor.

## DANGER SIGNS

- Lips or fingernails are blue

Take  4 or  6 puffs of your quick-relief medicine AND

Go to the hospital or call for an ambulance \_\_\_\_\_ NOW!

(phone)

## Contact Information



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