

Tip Sheet # 18



Helping the Stroke Survivor to Take Medications

“Pure and simple, I believe it’s (medication) one of the single most important factors for preventing a stroke from disabling me ever again” – quoted by a seventy year old grandmother who had a stroke in Senelick & Dougherty (2001), p. 101

It is important that stroke survivors take their medications as prescribed.

- Medicines are often given to keep the blood thin. This helps to avoid another stroke.
- Medications may also be given to control high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, or other conditions that the survivor may have.
- See **Tip Sheet #5 Medications for the Stroke Survivor** for tips on how to learn more about the specific types of medications that the survivor has. There are also forms that can be used to list the survivor’s medications, side effects, and questions that you may have.

So... what do I do if the survivor does not want to take their medications?

One caregiver said this, *“What upsets me is that he doesn’t like to take medications or doesn’t want to get the prescriptions filled, or he has one excuse after another why he shouldn’t take the medicine.”*

Another caregiver said, *“There have been times when I’ve come home and see pills on the floor and I ask her if she’s taken them and she says yes. I really don’t know because I’m not here. Sometimes when I opened the pill organizer, it would have more pills in it, less pills in it.”*

There are many reasons why survivors may not want to take their medications. Put an X on those that apply.

- ☐ Don't think they are needed
- ☐ Can't stand the taste of them going down
- ☐ Trouble swallowing
- ☐ Upset stomach after taking them
- ☐ Side effects
- ☐ Too expensive
- ☐ Forgets to take them
- ☐ Can't get out to get prescriptions filled
- ☐ Can't afford the co-pay or high costs of medicines
- ☐ Feels hopeless or depressed
- ☐ Doesn't understand when and how much to take
- ☐ Can't get the lid off very easy
- ☐ Is confused or has thinking or memory problems
- ☐ Unclear instructions
- ☐ Lack of knowledge
- ☐ Other _____
- ☐ Other _____
- ☐ Other _____

If the survivor has trouble swallowing the medication, call the doctor to ask if the medication can be prescribed in a different form. Many medications come in liquid form rather than tablets. Some medications can be crushed and put into applesauce or pudding. Call the speech therapist to see if there are any exercises or tricks of the trade that can help. For more on swallowing, see **Tip Sheet #17 Helping the Stroke Survivor to Eat.**

If the survivor has an upset stomach, side effects, or can't stand the taste of medications going down, call the doctor to see if a change in medication is needed. See **Tip Sheet #5 Medications for the Stroke Survivor to begin to list side effects of each medication. Some medications interact with each other and shouldn't be taken together. All medications may not need to be taken at the same time. The survivor may be able to split them up so they don't have to take so many pills at once. Get prescriptions filled at one pharmacy so the pharmacist knows all of the survivor's medications and can help. Don't be afraid to call your doctor or pharmacist.**



If the survivor forgets to take their medications or is confused or has thinking or memory problems, there are some strategies that might help. ***If the survivor forgets their medications, do not have them double up on the next dose. Call the doctor or pharmacist for advice.*** Pill boxes can be helpful if the survivor is capable of using them. Reminders, like an alarm on a watch or smartphone, or a post it note on the fridge, or a note on the TV might help. A medication chart similar to the ones in **Tip Sheet #5 The Stroke Survivor's Medications** can be helpful. If the survivor is confused or has thinking or memory problems, you may have to either give the medications to them yourself, or arrange for someone to do it. Talk to your nurse or pharmacist for ideas. The pharmacist can also help you find lids that the survivor can easily remove.



If money is an issue, there are ways to help pay for prescription drugs. Ask the doctor or pharmacist about prescription drug programs. Many prescription drug companies make some medications free of charge to low income persons. Your doctor must make the request to the pharmaceutical company. Not all medications are included in the programs, but it is worth a try. Ask the pharmacist if there are any coupons, or if there is a less expensive drug that they can use.

If the survivor feels hopeless or depressed, call the doctor or a mental health professional right away. Medications for depression and psychological counseling can be very effective. Depression to the point of not taking needed medications is serious. **See Tip Sheet #9 Dealing with the Stroke Survivor's Emotions While Providing Care** to explore emotions the survivor is having, to screen them for symptoms of depression, and for strategies for finding help.

If the survivor doesn't think that the medications are needed, check out the medications more carefully. Maybe they are not needed. Maybe a mistake has been made. Call the doctor or nurse to clarify if the medications really are needed.

If the survivor is not motivated to take the medication, consider the five stages of change. There are five stages of change with behaviors and each stage may require different strategies.



1. **Not ready to change:** means that the survivor is not ready for change or to take their medications on their own right now. Instead, this stage is a good time to explain the benefits of the medication. Make a list of benefits with the survivor.
2. **Thinking about change:** means the survivor is thinking about taking the medication. Your survivor has looked at the benefits of the medication, but also has reasons for not taking it. Discuss barriers or reasons why the survivor does not want to take the medication. Help them weigh the pros and cons of taking the medication.
3. **Preparing for action:** means your survivor would like to start taking the medication on a regular basis. This is a good time to set up a plan for action. Help them figure out when medication is to be taken and how to stay on schedule.
4. **Taking action:** means your survivor is taking their medications as prescribed. Help them remember to take their medications. Make it easy for them to continue. Monitor their progress. Reward them for taking their medications on their own.
 - **Plan for setbacks:** Lapses will happen. Accept the setback and continue to strive for the future.
5. **Maintaining a good thing:** means the prescribed medications have become part of the survivor's daily routine. Reward your survivor for their achievement.