

Understanding Your Pharmacist and Medications

By JoAnna Harper, Pharm.D, R.Ph

Pharmacy school involves more than just learning to “push pills.” The ultimate goal is to help patients understand his or her medication and better manage health conditions. As a pharmacist, I am part of your medical team with four years of specialized training in medications.

We have a lot of information to offer patients, specifically those with scleroderma. For instance, your pharmacist can answer your medication questions, explain new medications or changes in your meds, check for drug interactions, and help your doctor choose the right medication for you.

There also are many different types of pharmacists. Although the pharmacists you may commonly interact with work at drugstores or outpatient pharmacies (these pharmacists are called “retail pharmacists”), there are also pharmacists who work at hospitals, insurance companies, research facilities and universities (these pharmacists are called “clinical pharmacists.”)

The main difference between a clinical pharmacist and a retail pharmacist is how involved he or she is in your medical team. Clinical pharmacists offer advice and direct education to patients and providers to better patient care. He or she also monitors drug levels closely; reviews vitals, lab results, side effects and conditions; participates in the medical team meetings; and provides you with recommendations about how you can improve your condition using medication and non-medication related options.

It is not appropriate for a pharmacist to: allow personal feelings or objections to interfere with his or her job duties, talk about your medications or conditions without professional need to do so, change your prescription without speaking to your provider (unless there is an agreement between your pharmacist and the provider), predict your insurance information, or what will be covered by your insurance.

Helping Your Pharmacist Help You

There are many ways that you can be a more active member of your medical team and can assist your providers and pharmacists to improve your care and decrease the problems along the way. Some of the ways you can help are:

- **Carry a list of all your medications**, including doses, how often you take it, the prescribing doctor and what it is for.
- **Make sure to update your medication list** with any changes made after every visit with your health care provider.

- **Keep a list of allergies** and your reaction to each allergy. If the allergy is due to a medication, it is good to know when the allergy happened.
- **Request a “list of formulary”** from your insurance provider (sometimes you can find this online). This list allows the provider and pharmacist to see what medications your insurance covers at the lowest cost possible. Many times, a similar medication can be used for you at a much cheaper cost, especially if you haven’t tried other similar medications.
- **Keep a diary of side effects of your condition**, especially when you begin new medications or meds are changed. This will help your medical team determine the cause of any changes in your scleroderma or other conditions. Medications usually do not cause or increase the activity of your scleroderma, but medications can make one symptom worse when treating another symptom. For example, Diltiazem or Verapamil can be used to treat Raynaud Phenomenon, but can worsen acid reflux.
- If you experience any changes in your condition or concerns about a medication, **contact your pharmacy and provider**. Each one has a different perspective and can offer valuable insight.
- **Do not hesitate to ask questions**. Bring a list of questions to each office visit and every time you go to your pharmacy. It will make you less likely to forget what questions you have and allow time for adequate answers.
- Before starting a new medication, make sure you **ask your provider or pharmacist any questions you might have**. These questions could include: What is it for? What does it do? When will I start seeing the effect of the medication? Side effects to expect and if/when the side effects will go away? Does this interact with any other drugs or foods? When is the best time to take the medication? What needs to be monitored? Do I take this with or without food?
- **Make sure to let your pharmacist know if you have any kidney or liver problems**, or if you have been told you have decreased kidney or liver function. Many drugs need to be adjusted, based on your bodies functioning, which often changes over time.
- **Always check your medication before leaving the pharmacy**. If it is a new medication, be sure to talk face-to-face with the pharmacist so you can understand your medication. If it is a refill, make sure the medication looks the same as it has in the past. If it is a different shape, color or size, make sure the pharmacist verifies that he or she has given you the correct medication.

You are your best advocate in your medical team. When you follow these tips, you help the rest of your medical team provide the best care, which saves you time, money and frustration. Make sure to be open and honest with your pharmacist about your medications and ask any questions you may have, regardless of how minor you think it may be.

Using the specialized knowledge of your entire medical team, and your knowledge of your own body on a daily basis, your medical team can tailor your medications and

suggest non-medication options for what ails you. With open and honest communication, and being an active part of your medical team, we can make living with scleroderma better.

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