



Consumers Can Help Prevent Harmful Medication Incidents

SafeMedicationUse.ca Newsletter

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Be Sure You Know the Meaning of “Take as Needed”

It’s important to understand how your doctor wants you to use your medications. Some medications are meant to be taken every day. Other medications should be used only when a specific symptom occurs, such as pain or trouble sleeping. In those cases, the medication instructions will say that it should be taken “as needed” or “as required”. **However, this instruction does not mean that the medication can be taken again and again until the symptom is gone.**

SafeMedicationUse.ca received a report from a consumer who was taking lorazepam to help her sleep. The instructions on her prescription bottle said “TAKE 1 TABLET BY MOUTH AT BEDTIME AS REQUIRED”. When the consumer asked for a refill earlier than expected, the pharmacist discovered that the consumer had misunderstood the instructions. The consumer thought that she could take as many tablets as she needed to get to sleep each night, so long as she took only 1 tablet at a time. However, the doctor wanted her to take just 1 tablet for the night, and only if she was having trouble sleeping.

Luckily, she was not harmed, but taking too much of this and some other medications can lead to serious harm or even death. If your healthcare provider has told you to take a medication “as needed”, be sure you know what that means. The exact meaning of “as needed” may be different for different people and for different medications.

SafeMedicationUse.ca has the following advice to help consumers better understand the meaning of “as needed”:

- If the instructions for your medication include “as needed”, be sure you understand:
 - the reason for taking the medication
 - how much medication you are to take each time
 - how often you can take the medication
 - the maximum amount of medication you can take each day
- Sometimes, the instructions for a medication may say to take the medication regularly and also “as needed”. Be sure that you understand the situations when you can take the extra “as needed” doses and also the maximum amount that you can take each day.
- Ask for written instructions in an easy-to-read format.
- If a medication that you are taking “as needed” is not helping you to feel better, do not take more than the doctor prescribed. Speak to your healthcare provider for advice.



Read our safety tips to [Understand How to Take Your Medicines Properly](#).

Medication safety bulletins contribute to Global Patient Safety Alerts.

This newsletter was developed in collaboration with Best Medicines Coalition and Patients for Patient Safety Canada.

Recommendations are shared with healthcare providers, through the ISMP Canada Safety Bulletin, so that changes can be made together.

This newsletter shares information about safe medication practices, is noncommercial, and is therefore exempt from Canadian anti-spam legislation.