

# Stick with it!

## The importance to committing to your treatment plan

By Kathy Peters

Medication adherence is defined by the World Health Organization as “the degree to which the person’s behavior corresponds with the agreed recommendations from a health care provider.” Although the terms “adherence” and “compliance” are often used synonymously, they are subtle differences between the two. Compliance is the extent to which a patient’s behaviour matches the prescriber’s advice, while adherence indicates that the patient and health-care provider are working together to improve the patient’s health by considering both the medical opinion and the patient’s lifestyle, values and preferences.

### Adherence matters

Adherence to therapy is a vital factor in treatment success. Failure to adhere is a serious matter that can lead not only to worsening of the disease, but also to increased health-care costs.

As a patient, the effectiveness of your treatment depends on both the efficacy of the medication and your adherence to the therapeutic regime

that your physician has prescribed. You, your health-care providers and the health-care system all have a role to play in improving medication adherence. A single method cannot make a difference on its own. Instead, you might find that you and your health-care providers use a combination of techniques to improve your outcomes.

A systematic approach such as the following might be implemented.

**Level of prescribing:** Your physician involves you in decision-making regarding the type and amount of medication. He or she will also look for ways to simplify medication taking.

**Communication:** Health-care providers explain key information when prescribing or dispensing a medicine, including telling you about common side effects. They might suggest that you use aids such as calendars, medication charts or pill boxes to incorporate the medication regime into your schedule.

**Follow-up:** Appropriate follow-up monitoring is scheduled, as required. Measuring medication adherence is challenging because it is tied to each individual patient’s lifestyle and behaviours. The following are some of the approaches that have been used.

- Subjective measurements are obtained by asking patients, family members, caregivers and physicians about the patient’s medication use.
- Objective measurements are obtained by counting pills, examining pharmacy refill records or using electronic medication event monitoring systems.
- Biochemical measurements are obtained by adding a nontoxic marker to the medication and detecting its presence in the blood or urine, or measuring serum drug levels.

Currently, a combination of measures are used to assess and improve adherence to medication. These tools help investigators in their research and recommendations. Along with monitoring of outcomes, compliance aids, good motivation and the proper support are key ingredients. Together, health professionals and their patients will have the greatest success with a multidisciplinary approach that identifies practical strategies and is customized to each individual’s needs and lifestyle. 

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### Treatment ➤ Adherence ➤ Outcomes

- Approximately 50 per cent of patients do not take medications as prescribed.
- Medication adherence is not exclusively the responsibility of the patient.
- Increasing adherence can have a greater effect on health than improvements in specific medical therapy.
- Medication-taking behaviour is complex, and involves patient, physician and process components.
- Identifying non-adherence is challenging.
- Solutions include encouraging a blame-free environment, opting for less frequent dosing and improving patient education.