Managing your medications... it’s about ‘sticktoitiveness’

Got a prescription? Are you taking the drug exactly as your doctor ordered? Probably not, and you’re not the only one. Studies have shown that only 50 per cent of us take prescribed medication correctly. This is referred to as adherence, or, as we like to call it, “sticktoitiveness”. Yes, we totally made up that word.

The World Health Organization defines adherence as “the extent to which a person’s behaviour, taking medication, following a diet, and/or executing lifestyle changes corresponds with agreed recommendations from a health care provider.”

How’s your sticktoitiveness?

If you can say “yes” to the following questions, that’s great. You’re probably adherent. Do you always:

- Get your prescriptions filled or refilled when needed?
- Remember to take the medications at the right time?
- Take the exact dosage prescribed?
- Continue to take the medication until the end of your course of treatment?

But here are some facts...

14% to 21% of patients never fill their original prescriptions and 30% to 50% of all patients ignore or compromise dosing instructions.¹

29% of patients stop taking their prescriptions before they run out.²

GSC’s own data showed over 50% of plan members with depression were non-adherent to their antidepressant medication.³

In the US, 125,000 deaths annually are due to non-adherence.⁴

So you’re the unsticktoit type, what’s the big deal?

It can be a big deal if you:

- Feel worse because you’re not getting the medication you need
- Develop complications or additional illnesses
- Have to visit the ER or are admitted to the hospital
- Become disabled and can’t work

Adherence is especially problematic and common for people with chronic health conditions like diabetes, depression, or high blood pressure. Surprisingly, adherence is poor even for more acute illnesses like cancer.
Yes, this time it’s all about you

If asked, most people would say non-adherence is mainly due to simply forgetting to take the medications. Not so! Each stage of the process—from receiving a prescription to filling it to taking it properly—is influenced by a range of personal attributes that influence your behaviour. Personal attributes can be everything from your age, gender, and living situation, to psychological factors like beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Numerous attributes may be at play all at the same time, and to varying degrees, at different stages of filling and taking prescriptions. Understanding the reasons for non-adherence brings you one step closer to becoming adherent.

Change is hard but you can do it…

Here are some tips to help improve your medication adherence:

- Set up reminders like posting notes someplace where you’ll see them, setting the alarm on your watch, or taking your medication when you do another daily task.
- Keep the medication where you’ll see it—in the middle of your dinner table or next to your toothbrush.
- Ask whether your pharmacy offers a reminder service for refills.
- If you’re taking multiple pills, get a pill box that holds a week’s supply.
- Create a schedule that shows what your medications are, how and when to take them, then put it up where you’ll see it.
- Tell your pharmacist when you are taking multiple medications (including vitamins, supplements or other non-prescription drugs) as an interaction could cause side effects.
- If you’re experiencing side effects, ask your doctor whether you could try a different dosage or switch to a different medication.
- Remember if you feel better, it’s because you’ve been taking your prescription, and if you stop you may feel worse again.
- If your doctor has directed you to take the medication for a certain length of time, don’t stop until you reach the end of your course of treatment.

Who are you?

We’ve identified an array of common personas that may describe you:

- The Non-filler: You don’t fill the prescription in the first place.
- The Forgetter: You just forget to take the prescription.
- The Skeptic: You fill the prescription then don’t take it because you don’t believe it will have any effect on your health.
- The Unsure: You don’t take the prescription properly because you don’t fully understand what it’s for, its benefits, its instructions, and so on.
- The Mixer Upper: You take a range of prescriptions at the same time with adherence varying from drug to drug.
- The Fearful: You don’t take the prescription properly due to perceived side effects.
- The Self-diagnoser: You take the prescription inconsistently based on how you feel—if you feel better, you stop taking it; if you feel worse, you start taking it.
- The Stopper: You stop taking the prescription before the recommended course of treatment ends.

Other bad things can happen too (yes, here comes the guilt trip)

- If your illness is contagious, you could be spreading it to friends, family members, and coworkers.
- Non-adherence to antibiotics has led to cases of dangerous bacteria becoming resistant to certain common antibiotics and causing a rise in untreatable infections.
- Private health care plans (like that provided by your employer) see higher costs, especially for disability plans, leaving less money available for other benefits.
- Provincial health care plans also see higher costs due to additional treatments, tests, and hospitalizations while governments struggle to manage the amount of our tax dollars going to health care.

Simply put, your medicine won’t work if you don’t take it. And if you don’t take it, you’re risking complications and a lower quality of life. Last, you are contributing strain to our healthcare system.

OK, guilt trip over.

So why aren’t you taking medications exactly as prescribed?
Not so fast… before leaving the pharmacy

- Look to see that you have the right medication. If you’ve bought the medication before, be sure it’s the same shape, colour, size, markings, and packaging. Notice something different? Ask the pharmacist about it.
- Ask for instructions on how to inject a drug or use an inhaler if you’re uncertain. If you have trouble swallowing pills, ask for some tips. If you’ve been told to split a tablet, the pharmacist can show you how.
- If the medication is in liquid form, make sure it comes with the proper spoon, cup, or syringe. Measuring utensils intended for cooking or eating might not give you the right dose.
- Get the phone number for the pharmacy so you can call if you have any questions later.
- Try to use the same pharmacy all the time—they will keep a record of all your prescriptions.

Your health professionals want to help…so ‘fess up

- If you’re not taking the medication you’ve been prescribed as directed or at all, say so and why.
- Keep an updated list of everything you’re taking that you can give to your doctor or pharmacist; it should include all medications, vitamins, herbal remedies, and supplements.
- If you don’t understand the instructions or information your doctor or pharmacist is giving you, tell them. It’s okay to ask them to repeat the information in a way that’s easier for you to understand. Perhaps you can take a family member or friend with you to take notes and help you remember the instructions.
- Mention any allergies you have or if you’ve had a problem in the past with any medication. Also mention if you’re pregnant, may become pregnant, or are breast feeding.

Everyone’s a winner

While not taking your prescription can lead to bad things, there’s no downside to being adherent. Your health could improve so you can continue your usual lifestyle and activities. Your provincial health plan will benefit when you don’t need additional medical appointments or hospital care. And you will contribute to the long term sustainability of your group benefits plan by maintaining your health and ability to work.

In a nutshell there are just three things to do: start it... take it... finish it. Putting it like that, adherence seems pretty simple, doesn’t it?

Notes:
3 Research data included over 28,000 GSC plan members and approximately 1.3 million claims submitted from January 1, 2009, to August 31, 2011.