THE PROOF SERIES

A PLAYFUL GUIDE TO YOUR MEDICATIONS

Meds Proof

Read every label, sort every pill, and never run dry — in plain language, with big type and a few laughs.



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PROUDLY CANADIAN



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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

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READ THE STICKER

Your Prescription Label Is a Map

That pharmacy sticker is small for a reason — it has to fit on a bottle. But every line on it is doing a job. Once you know where to look, reading it takes ten seconds flat.

Check the name › Read strength › Follow directions › Mind the dates

1. Find your name first — Always check the patient name at the top of the label. In a busy household with two people on medications, grabbing the wrong bottle is the most common mix-up of all.

2. Read the drug name and strength — The label shows the drug name and strength, like 'Metformin 500 mg'. The strength matters: the same drug can come in several strengths, and the pill size is not a reliable clue.

3. Decode the directions — Phrases like 'Take one tablet twice daily with food' are your instructions, not suggestions. 'Twice daily' means roughly twelve hours apart — breakfast and supper, for example.

4. Note the dates — Every label has a fill date and an expiry or 'discard after' date. An expired medication may lose strength or, worse, still be taken out of habit. Check dates before you take, not after.

TALE

E STORY

Dorothy, 79, squinted at a tiny label and took her husband's blood pressure pill instead of her vitamin. Both were fine, but the pharmacist now prints large-format labels for anyone who asks.

!

Pharmacies in Canada must include the drug name, strength, directions, and prescriber on every prescription label — it is your legal right to this information.

Take care: Never peel a label off and stick it on another bottle. If a label is smudged or unreadable, take the bottle back to the pharmacy for a fresh one.

READ THE STICKER

Strength: Why the Number Matters

Two white round pills can look identical and be completely different drugs — or the same drug at wildly different strengths. The milligrams on the label are the truth; the shape is just packaging.

Find the mg › Compare refills › Question changes › Know combos

1. Spot the strength — Look for a number followed by 'mg' (milligrams) or 'mcg' (micrograms) next to the drug name. '500 mg' is five times stronger than '100 mg' of the same drug — that is not a detail you want to guess.

2. Compare old and new bottles — When you refill, glance at the strength on the new bottle and compare it with the old one. If the doctor changed your dose, the bottles will differ — and you should have been told why.

3. Beware look-alikes — Some different drugs share shapes, colours, or even similar names. If a pill looks different from last time, ask the pharmacist before taking it. Suppliers change; mix-ups should not.

4. Watch combination pills — Some tablets contain two drugs in one (for example, a blood pressure pair). The label lists both strengths. Know that one pill can be doing two jobs.

TALE

E STORY

Earl, 82, noticed his new refill tablets were smaller and pinker than the old ones.

The pharmacist confirmed the supplier had changed — same drug, same strength, new outfit.

!

A milligram is one-thousandth of a gram. The 'mg' number is how the doctor, the pharmacist, and you all agree on exactly how much medicine you are taking.

Take care: If two bottles of the same drug show different strengths and nobody explained why, call the pharmacy before taking either. Dose changes should always come with a conversation.

READ THE STICKER

Directions: 'With Food' Means Business

'Take with food.' 'Take on an empty stomach.' 'Do not lie down for thirty minutes.' These are not friendly suggestions from the pharmacist's imagination — they change how the drug works.

With food › Empty stomach › Stay upright › Clarify vagueness

1. Decode 'with food' — 'With food' usually means during a meal or with a snack. Food can protect your stomach from irritation or help the drug absorb properly. A few crackers count if a full meal is too much.

2. Decode 'empty stomach' — 'On an empty stomach' usually means one hour before eating or two hours after. Food can block these drugs from being absorbed, so the timing genuinely matters.

3. Respect the upright rule — Some pills (certain osteoporosis and antibiotic drugs) require you to stay upright for 30–60 minutes so they travel down properly. This rule exists because people have been hurt ignoring it.

4. Ask about the vague ones — 'As directed' or 'take as needed' leaves you guessing. If your label says this, ask the pharmacist to translate it into plain words and write them on the bottle.

TALE

STORY

Betty, 76, took her morning pill 'on an empty stomach' along with her full breakfast for years.

When the pharmacist explained the timing, her lab numbers improved within months.

! A glass of water with every pill is a good default: it helps the tablet travel down and dissolve where it should, not halfway.

Take care: Never lie down immediately after taking a pill that says to remain upright — the tablet can lodge in the esophagus and cause real damage. Sit up and stay up.

READ THE STICKER

Expiry Dates Are Not Decorations

Medicines do not improve with age like fine wine. They fade, weaken, and occasionally turn nasty. The expiry date is the manufacturer's promise — and it expires.

Find EXP › Toss the old › Check before trips › Review twice yearly

1. Find the date — Look for 'EXP' or an expiry date on the bottle or box. Some pharmacy labels also print a 'discard after' date, which is often one year from filling — use whichever comes first.

2. Toss the faded ones — Expired drugs can lose potency, which means your blood pressure or blood sugar pill quietly stops doing its job. Worse, a few old drugs can break down into harmful compounds.

3. Check before vacation — Before any trip, scan every bottle you will pack. Nothing ruins a holiday faster than discovering your prescription expired last month while you are three provinces away.

4. Review twice a year — Set a simple habit: every spring and fall, line up all your bottles and check dates. Toss the expired ones into your pharmacy's take-back program, never the trash or toilet.

TALE

E STORY

Frank, 84, found a bottle from 2019 hiding behind his vitamins during the spring review.

'It was practically a museum piece,' he laughed, and handed it to the pharmacist for safe disposal.

! The 'discard after' date on a pharmacy label can be earlier than the manufacturer's expiry — the pharmacy is being extra careful once the bottle has been opened.

Take care: Expired epinephrine auto-injectors and insulin are especially risky — these must be replaced before they expire, not after. Ask your pharmacist about reminders.

READ THE STICKER

The DIN: Your Drug's Licence Plate

Every approved drug in Canada carries a Drug Identification Number — a DIN. It is the drug's licence plate, and it is your proof that the product passed Health Canada's review.

Find the DIN › Know the meaning › Travel with it › Demand it online

1. Spot the DIN — Look for 'DIN' followed by eight digits on the box or bottle. This number is unique to that exact product — same drug, same strength, same maker.

2. Know why it matters — The DIN tells you this is a real, reviewed medicine — not a 'natural health product' or an unregulated import. Natural products carry an NPN instead, which is a different (lighter) review.

3. Use it when travelling — If you need an emergency refill away from home, the DIN lets any Canadian pharmacy identify your exact product instantly, even if they have never seen your file.

4. Beware no-DIN sellers — Medicines sold online without a DIN may be counterfeit, mislabelled, or made in uninspected facilities. If the price seems too good and there is no DIN, walk away.

TALE

E STORY

Ruth, 71, nearly ordered 'cheap' pills from a foreign website until her daughter spotted there was no DIN anywhere on the page.

The pharmacy price suddenly looked very reasonable.

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Homeopathic products have a DIN-HM instead of a DIN. It looks official, but it is not the same review — ask your pharmacist what the evidence actually says.

Take care: Never buy prescription drugs from websites that do not require a prescription and show no DIN. Counterfeit pills have been found to contain anything from chalk to fentanyl.

READ THE STICKER

Auxiliary Labels: The Bonus Stickers

Those small coloured stickers the pharmacist adds — 'Shake well', 'Keep refrigerated', 'Avoid sunlight' — are called auxiliary labels. They are the footnotes of your prescription, and they earn their space.

Read every sticker › Shake liquids › Refrigerate right › Heed sun warnings

1. Read them all — When you pick up a prescription, read every sticker, not just the big white label. Each one addresses a specific quirk of that drug — shaking, refrigeration, or staying upright.

2. Shake well means it — Liquid medicines settle. 'Shake well' means the good stuff sinks to the bottom, and an unshaken spoonful can be mostly syrup — or mostly medicine. Give it ten good shakes.

3. Respect the fridge ones — 'Keep refrigerated' protects drugs that degrade in warmth. But note: freezing is different from refrigerating — never freeze a medicine unless the label says you can.

4. Mind the sun warning — 'Avoid prolonged sunlight' on a drug like certain antibiotics or blood pressure pills means the drug can make your skin burn faster. Wear sunscreen and a hat while you are on it.

TALE

STORY

George, 77, ignored the 'shake well' sticker on his antibiotic and took the watery top half for three days.

'I was drinking expensive sugar water,' he admitted.

! Auxiliary labels are standardized across Canadian pharmacies — a 'shake well' sticker means the same thing in Victoria and St. John's.

Take care: If a sticker says 'May cause drowsiness', take that seriously: no driving, no ladders, no operating anything with blades until you know how it affects you.

READ THE STICKER

Package Inserts: Worth a Glance

That folded paper the size of a bedsheet inside the box is the package insert. You do not need to read all of it — but knowing which parts to skim makes you a smarter patient.

Find how-to-take › Skim side effects › Note warning signs › Keep box briefly

1. Find the 'how to take' part — Skip to the section on how to take the drug. It repeats the label directions with more detail — and sometimes includes tips the label had no room for, like which foods to avoid.

2. Skim the side effects list — The insert lists every side effect ever reported, which can be alarming. Focus on the 'common' ones at the top; the rare ones at the bottom are there for completeness, not to scare you.

3. Note the 'call your doctor' box — Most inserts have a short list of symptoms that mean 'call your doctor right away'. Read that list once. It is the only part worth memorizing.

4. Keep the box a week — Do not toss the box and insert the day you fill a new prescription. Keep them for a week or two while you settle in — then recycle with confidence.

TALE

E STORY

Margaret, 80, read an entire insert and convinced herself the pill would cause seventeen ailments.

Her pharmacist spent ten minutes on the two that actually mattered. She takes it happily now.

! Pharmacists are required to offer counselling on new prescriptions in most provinces. That conversation is the human version of the insert — and you can ask questions.

Take care: Do not stop a drug because the side-effect list frightened you. Call the pharmacist first — most side effects are manageable, and stopping suddenly can be worse.

READ THE STICKER

When the Label Confuses You, Ask

Pharmacists expect questions — answering them is literally part of the job, and in Canada you are paying a dispensing fee that covers this advice. Confusion is the signal to ask, not to guess.

Note the question › Bring the bottle › Ask plainly › Label the answer

1. Write down your question — Before you call or visit, jot down exactly what confuses you: the wording, the timing, the new pill's colour. Specific questions get specific answers.

2. Bring the bottle — Take the actual bottle with you. The pharmacist can read the DIN, check the fill date, and spot a labelling error in seconds — faster than any phone description.

3. Ask for plain language — If the answer comes back in pharmacist-speak, say so: 'Can you say that in plain words?' Good pharmacists love this request. It is why they chose the job.

4. Write the answer on the label — Ask the pharmacist to add a clearer auxiliary label, or write the translation on the bottle yourself with a marker. Future-you will be grateful.

TALE

E STORY

Harold, 83, finally asked what 'sublingual' meant after months of swallowing the tablet whole.

'Under the tongue, Harold,' the pharmacist said gently. 'Under the tongue.'

!

Most provinces fund a formal medication review (often called MedsCheck or similar) where the pharmacist sits down with you and goes through everything — ask if you qualify.

Take care: Never let embarrassment stop a question. Pharmacists have heard everything, from 'is this a suppository?' to 'can I take it with beer?' — yours will not be the strangest.

SORT IT SUNDAY

Meet the Pill Organizer

A pill organizer is a plastic box with little doors labelled by day — and sometimes by time of day. It is the single cheapest, simplest tool for never wondering 'did I take it?' again.

Pick the layout › Keep it cheap › Easy-open lids › Buy a spare

1. Pick your style — Weekly organizers (seven compartments) suit once-a-day pills. If you take pills morning, noon, and night, get one with four time slots per day. Bigger pills need a large-compartment model.

2. Spend a few dollars — A basic weekly organizer costs about five to ten dollars at any pharmacy. Fancy electronic ones with alarms exist, but the five-dollar box works for most people.

3. Choose easy-open lids — Arthritis and childproofing do not mix well. Look for organizers labelled 'easy open' or 'arthritis friendly' — the lids should pop with a thumb press, not a wrestling match.

4. Get a spare — Buy two identical organizers. While one is in use, the other waits as a backup — and for travel, you simply grab the spare instead of repacking.

TALE

E STORY

Lillian, 81, called her organizer 'the little hotel' and her pills 'the guests'.

Checking in guests every Sunday became her favourite ritual — she has not missed a dose since.

!

Pharmacists can recommend an organizer that fits your exact pill sizes — bring your bottles in and test the compartments before you buy.

Take care: Do not store pills in an organizer for more than a week or two at a time. Some drugs are sensitive to air and moisture once out of their original bottle.

SORT IT SUNDAY

The Sunday Loading Ritual

Loading your organizer once a week turns seven days of pill decisions into one calm fifteen-minute session. Sunday evening works beautifully: quiet house, week ahead, pills sorted.

Gather bottles › One at a time › Check tricky doses › Store visibly

1. Gather every bottle — Line up all your prescription bottles, vitamins, and over-the-counter pills on the table. If a bottle is not on the table, its pill does not go in the box — no guessing from memory.

2. Work bottle by bottle — Take one bottle, read its label, and place the week's worth of doses in the right compartments. Finish that bottle completely before starting the next one. One bottle at a time, no multitasking.

3. Double-check the tricky ones — Pills taken on specific days (like a weekly tablet) or at specific times get extra attention. Count compartments aloud if it helps — pharmacists do exactly this.

4. Close, store, done — Snap every lid shut, return the bottles to their storage spot, and put the organizer where you will see it — beside the coffee maker or your toothbrush.

TALE

TALE STORY

Walter, 78, loads his organizer while listening to the Sunday news.

'Pills and politics,' he says. 'I sort the pills; the politicians stay unsorted.'

! Good lighting matters during loading: a bright kitchen table and reading glasses prevent the classic 'two pills in Monday, none in Tuesday' error.

Take care: If you drop a pill on the floor during loading and cannot identify it with certainty, do not guess. Set it aside and ask the pharmacist.

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