

Helping Your Child Take Medicines

For liquid medicines, a plastic syringe – which can be purchased at any pharmacy – is easier to use than a spoon. But if you have only a spoon, keep a towel handy for spills. Approach your child in a matter-of-fact way with an expectation that the medicine will be taken without resistance. Some children respond better to an enthusiastic “Mary Poppins” approach.

Put your child in a sitting position and pour or drip the medicine onto the back of the tongue. Try not to squirt it into the pouch inside the cheek because it will not go down when your child swallows. You should try to place the liquid beyond the teeth or gum line. Also, try not to squirt it forcefully into the back of the throat because of the danger of going into the windpipe and causing choking. If you drip the medicine slowly, you will most likely avoid gagging or choking.

Bitter medicines often lead to refusal unless some of the following preventive steps are taken:

- Have your child suck on a popsicle beforehand to partially numb the mouth. Let the child suck on the popsicle after the medication is administered as well.
- Mix it with a strong flavor (such as Kool-Aid powder, chocolate syrup, or pancake syrup) to hide the bad taste.
- Mix crushed pills with one of your child’s favorite foods that does not require any chewing. Consider ice cream topping (especially chocolate), honey (not in children younger than twelve months), maple syrup, apple sauce, ice cream, sherbet, or yogurt. Before adding the medicine, have your child practice swallowing the food alone without chewing it (because chewing will bring out the bad taste of the medicine). Use only a small amount of the favorite food to make sure that it is all eaten.
- Have a glass of your child’s favorite cold drink ready to rinse his mouth afterward—a sort of “chaser.”
- Praise and hug your child for all cooperation.
- If old enough, some children respond to being given complete control of the spoon.

Children under the age of four sometimes vigorously refuse to take medicines, even after you have tried to hide the taste. Here are some recommendations:

- Be honest and sympathetic (“I’m sorry it tastes bad. We can mix it with a little bit of anything you like”).
- Be firm and give a reason (“You have to take it...it will help you feel better”).
- Be sure your child is not lying flat to prevent choking.
- Insert the syringe between the teeth and drip the medicine onto the back of the tongue.
- Keep the mouth closed until your child swallows. Gravity can help if you have your child in an upright position. However, swallowing cannot occur if the head is bent backward.
- Do not attack self-esteem (for instance by saying “You’re acting like a baby”).

- If your child vomits or spits out the medicine if it is a pill and you see the pill, it can be repeated. However, if it is a liquid, do not repeat it as it is difficult to know how much the child took.
- Praise and hug your child for all cooperation.

Some children have difficulty swallowing pills and capsules. Here are some suggestions:

- Empty out the capsules or crush the pills. You can do this with most pills except slow-release or enteric-coated pills. Be sure to check with your physician first.
- Slow-release capsules can be emptied as long as the contents are swallowed without chewing. Since capsules usually contain medicines with a bitter taste, the contents need to be mixed with a small amount of sweet food.
- Pills can be crushed between two spoons. Crushing is made easier by first moistening the pill with a few drops of water and letting it soften for 15 minutes.
- Place the pill or capsule far back on the tongue and have your child quickly drink water or Kool-Aid through a straw. If your child concentrates on swallowing (even gulping) the liquid, the pill will follow downstream without a hitch.

Call your child's physician if your child vomits the medicine more than once or you are unable to get your child to take an essential medicine.

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