

# Helping Your Child Take Medicine

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This handout offers tips to help your child take medicine. These are ideas that have worked for parents, caregivers and children. We hope they work for you, too!

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## How to talk to your child about taking medicine



It is best to talk with your child in simple, honest language to help them understand why they have to take medicine.

- Call the medicine what it is and explain how it will help your child.
- Prepare your child in advance for when it will be time to take medicine. This helps to make it predictable and expected, instead of a surprise.
- When you give your child medicine, keep a positive attitude. Your child can sense it when you expect a certain kind of reaction from them. If they feel you expect help from them, they are more likely to be helpful and cooperative.
- Praise your child once they have taken their medicine.

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## Help your child feel in control

When your child is sick, it can be hard for them to feel like they have any control over their lives. This can be really hard for kids, and it is important to do what you can to give them some choice in what happens to them. It is important to explain that some things are not a choice – like taking medicine. But there are some things that they can have some control over, like how they get to take their medicine. Give your child choices whenever possible.

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### To Learn More

- Child Life  
206-987-3285
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [seattlechildrens.org](http://seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

Here are some ways that you can give your child choices about taking medicine:

- Help your child make a plan about how they will take their medicine, and write the plan down. If they are involved in making the plan, it can be easier for them to stick to it.
- Practice the written plan over and over.
- Encourage your child to pretend to give medicine to a doll, a puppet or a stuffed animal. This is called “medical play,” and your child can practice it right before they take their medicine and at other times.
- Make “Medicine Time” a part of the daily schedule and routine. Consistently using the same time and even place for medicine time helps your child get ready and feel prepared to take medicine.
- Help your pre-school or young school-age child to make a reward or sticker chart to help keep track of their progress.
- If they are 3 years old or above, involve your child in getting their medicine ready and taking it while you help. Always avoid leaving children alone to take their medicine.
- Be creative and work with your child to find new ways of taking medicine.

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### How to make medicine easier to take

Here are some examples of how to make it easier for your child to take their medicine. Remember to involve your child whenever you can. This will help them feel like they have some control.

**Before you try any of the ideas below, check with your child’s pharmacist. Some medicines may not be mixed with or taken with certain kinds of food or liquid. Other medicines may not be chewed, crushed or cut.**

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### How to make liquid medicine taste better

Some kinds of liquid medicines are bitter and can be hard to take. Try these tips if your child has a hard time taking liquid medicine:

- Ask your pharmacist about flavoring options. Sometimes they can add a special product to help the medicine taste better.
- Try using a syringe without a needle in it. Ask your pharmacist or healthcare provider about getting a liquid medicine syringe.
- Your child may not taste the medicine as much if they first eat something cold. Try popsicles or ice chips.
- Mix the medicine with a strong flavor. Try a favorite powdered drink mix, chocolate syrup, maple syrup, cherry syrup or other flavored syrups. Have your child help with mixing the medicine to include them in the process.
- Take away the aftertaste of the medicine by having your child quickly drink juice afterwards. Sucking on a lollipop might also help.
- Give your child something sticky that will coat their tongue before giving them medicine. Try maple syrup.
- Let your child make their own choices about how they want to take the medicine.

### How to give medicines that can be crushed or powdered

Mixing crushed pills or powdered medicine with food or juice can help mask the taste. It is important that your child is aware that you are doing this. If the technique is not successful and they feel “tricked” they may start avoiding foods. Try some of these tips:

- Buy a pill crusher at your local drug store or pharmacy, or crush pills between two spoons.
- Try mixing crushed pills with foods like applesauce, yogurt, sherbet, pudding or ice cream. Try liquids like cherry syrup, orange juice, grape juice or frozen raspberry juice concentrate.
- For the soft foods that are listed above, have your child practice swallowing small amounts without chewing before adding medicine.
- For syrups, you can dissolve crushed pills in a spoon with a little water and add syrup right into the spoon.
- For juices, you can add crushed pills to a small amount of juice, and then follow it with a drink that your child chooses.

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### How to teach kids to swallow pills

Many children can learn how to swallow pills with just a little practice. For some children, learning how to swallow pills can be hard. Your child can start trying to swallow pills if they are 5 or more years old. Here are tips to make it easier to learn how:

- Gel caps come in many sizes, and can be used to help take away the bitter taste of pills. Ask your child’s healthcare provider or pharmacist for gel caps. Before filling gel caps with a pill or a crushed pill, try giving them empty or filled with sugar to practice.
- Quickly dip the gel cap in ice water before giving it to your child to swallow. This will make the coating very slippery and easier to swallow.
- Have your child practice swallowing pills by starting with small candies. First, have your child swallow a very small piece of candy, like one of the sprinkles that you put on ice cream. Then use candies that are just a little bigger, like M&M’s Minis and Tic Tac candies. Never have your child swallow candy that is larger than a pea or a small bean. Work up to practicing with gel caps filled with sugar.
- Put the pill in a spoonful of Jell-O, pudding or yogurt and let it slide down your child’s throat.
- Cut the pill into halves or quarters. Give your child one piece at a time to swallow.
- Try making pills easier to take by putting them in a small piece of fruit snack.

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### How to make your child comfortable when taking medicine

- If your child is pre-school or young school-age, hold them sitting up in your lap.
- Let your child hold something that makes them feel more comfortable, like a blanket or a stuffed animal.

### If tips and tricks do not work

Even when you feel like you have tried everything, some children will still have trouble taking medicine. A break or a time-out before taking medicine might help them calm down.

If that does not work, these are things that other parents have done when their child has a lot of trouble taking medicine:

- Be kind but firm with your child. Remind them that taking medicine is not a choice. Let your child know that you are sorry it is difficult, and that you hope that it will get easier. Let your child know that since taking medication is important to help their body, you will help them take the medicine this time.
- If your child will not open their mouth when you ask them to, you can help by pressing down on their chin. You can also put your finger in your child's mouth near the inner cheek and push down the lower jaw.
- Help your child to keep their mouth closed until they swallow the medicine. It is best if your child is sitting up straight. Make sure your child's head is not bent too far backward. This makes it very difficult to swallow.
- Ask someone else to help you. Sit your child on another caregiver's lap. One adult can give a "hug hold" from behind. They can wrap their arms around your child and hold their arms and head while the other adult gives the medicine.
- If your child needs help one time taking medicine, approach each new medication dose by giving them the opportunity to succeed.

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### References

[pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/health/medicine.html](https://pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/health/medicine.html)