

# A Pill Card Can Help Patients Take Correct Medications on Time












One in 4 Americans do not take prescription medicines as prescribed. Adherence to medication instructions is particularly important when people have chronic illnesses such as diabetes or heart failure. Many people who fail to adhere to medication instructions do so because they do not understand how to take their medicines. Medication nonadherence costs an estimated \$100 billion annually in hospital admissions, doctor visits, lab tests, and nursing home admissions.

Although it's important that older adults retain the responsibility for their own medications as long as possible, it is even more important that they take the medicines as prescribed and understand the reason for doing so. Although some assisted living (AL) residents and their families are eager to turn that responsibility over to the appropriate clinical staff in the AL, many residents want to administer their own medications for as long as they can. In either case, a simple chart illustrating the reasons for the medication, the type and color of the pill, the dosage, and the schedule would be likely to have a positive impact on adherence.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), a part of the US Department of Health and Human Services, offers free, online instructions for creating a pill card—an illustrated medication

**Table 1.**  
**Pill Card Template**

Simply copy and paste the pill care template from the AHRQ Web site and fill in the appropriate medications, dosages, and schedule using the sample graphics supplied. Graphics used in the guide are from the Clip Art library of Microsoft Word, so it's easy to add graphics as needed. You can add as much or as little information in the header area as you desire. Include the pharmacy phone number or the number of the resident's prescribing physician.

Sample Pill Card for: AL Resident			Created: May 1, 2008 Pharmacy phone: 222-222-2020			
Name	Used For	Instructions	Morning 	Afternoon 	Evening 	Night 
 Furosemide 20 mg	Fluid reduction	Take 2 pills in the morning and 2 pills in the evening	○ ○		○ ○	
 Simvastatin 20 mg	Cholesterol reduction	Take 1 pill at night				
 Insulin 70/30	Diabetes (blood sugar) 	Inject 24 units before breakfast and 12 units before dinner	 24 units		 12 units	

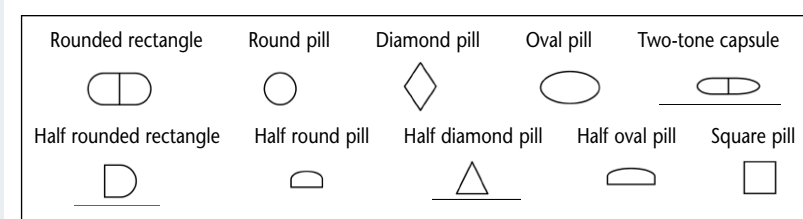
schedule—using only a personal or laptop computer and printer (Table 1). AHRQ suggests that using a pill card—with pictures and simple phrases to show each medicine, its purpose, how much to take, and when to take it—re-

duces misunderstandings. A pill card can serve as a visual aid for confirming that patients understand how to take the medicines properly and as a reminder to take medicines. For residents whose medications are administered by

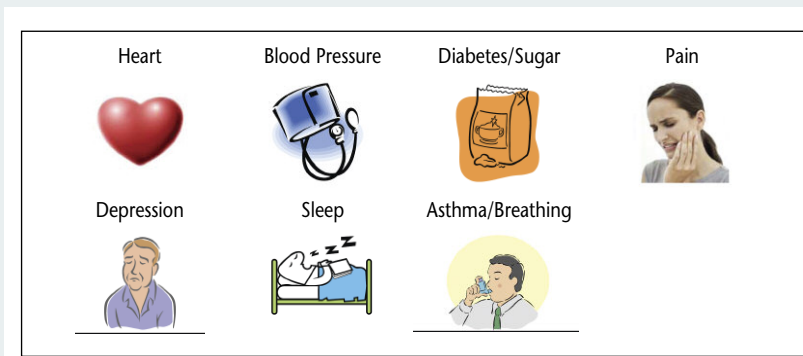
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**Table 2.**  
**Common Pill Shapes**

The site offers shapes to represent each of the pills that can be included on the pill card. A simple cut-and-paste step transfers the shapes to the template. Shapes include whole and half pills. You copy the shape that you need and paste it onto the pill card. Simple instructions allow you to color the shape to match the color of the actual pill. You may also color in the shapes by hand after printing out the card.



**Table 3.**  
**Common Images for Medication Uses**



the facility, pill cards reinforce their understanding. Residents who administer their own medications can be encouraged to create a pill card for themselves, work with a family member to create a card, or, if facility regulations permit, have a staff member work with residents to review their medications and create a card.

AHRQ's "How to Create a Pill Card" provides step-by-step instructions. You only need a computer with word processing software, a printer (preferably color), and information on all of the medicines to be included. How to Create a Pill Card is intended for anyone who takes medicines regularly

or who cares for someone who does. To download the instructions, go to [www.ahrq.gov/qual/pillcard/pillcard.htm](http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/pillcard/pillcard.htm).

The site includes simple instructions, templates, a sample set of graphics (Tables 2 and 3) to illustrate 4 different times of day that medicines may need to be taken, and sample graphics illustrating what each medicine is used for. The process is very simple, and residents could be encouraged to participate in the process. Copy the template to a word document on your computer, fill in or cut and paste as needed, and then print the document for the resident.

ALC



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Articles should focus on practical information directed to the professional caregiving team—including nursing staff, physicians, pharmacists, and administrators—with insight, advice, news, and practical tips to improve health outcomes for elderly residents.

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