A pharmacist is a professional who is qualified to fill prescription medications ordered by a doctor. They often provide information on how to take medications, potential drug interactions and tips on taking prescription medication on schedule.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING YOUR PILLS ON SCHEDULE

Taking your pills on schedule is known as adherence. Adherence is key to getting the best results possible from your treatment. Unlike the cancer medicines given at your doctor’s office, cancer pills put you in charge of your treatment. This means you are responsible for remembering to take your medicine as prescribed and on schedule.

How does adherence affect the results of your cancer treatment?
Cancer pills release the active ingredient over a set period of time to keep a steady amount of medicine in the body. A steady level of medicine helps the pills work correctly. It may be helpful to think of each dose as “refreshing” the amount of medicine in the body. When you skip a dose, the level of medicine is lowered and this can lower the medicine’s success at treating the cancer. On the other hand, if you take doses too close together, you may get too much of the medicine in your body. This extra medicine can lead to more side effects. For this reason, when you forget to take your pills it can be dangerous to take an extra dose.

Each cancer pill has its own unique schedule. Some are taken once a day. Others are taken several times a day or only for a few days during the week. Pills can also be prescribed for a week at a time, followed by a break lasting a few weeks or for a longer length of time. That is why it is important for you to have a discussion with your doctor and pharmacist to make sure you understand your medications’ schedule and dosage.

HOW YOUR PHARMACIST CAN HELP

Regardless of the type of medicine that a doctor prescribes, pharmacists help patients by:

Explaining how the medication works. Your doctor or another member of your health care team may have reviewed the ins-and-outs of the medication when you received your prescription, but hearing the information more than once is helpful—especially at what can be a stressful time. If you are taking multiple medicines for different health problems, your pharmacist can also help you understand any potential medicine interactions that may be harmful or make your medicine less effective.

Reinforcing how the medication is to be taken. For example, some medications should be taken with meals; others should be taken on an empty stomach. If the medication is self-administered via an injection, the pharmacist can explain the proper injection technique.

Reviewing which side effects might occur. This information is provided in the package insert (or PI) that accompanies the medication, but it can be valuable to hear it explained in everyday language. The pharmacist
can also monitor any side effects you may experience and offer guidance (in collaboration with your health care team) on possible ways to relieve these symptoms these side effects may cause.

**Explaining what your insurance covers.** After the patent expires, other companies are allowed to produce and market drugs with the same chemical make-up (after FDA approval); in all important ways, these drugs are the same as the original and are called “generics.” An insurer may require that a generic (or biosimilar) version of the drug be dispensed, if one exists. Your pharmacist can help you determine if this is the case and explain any differences between the original drug and the covered drug, including any out-of-pocket cost implications.

**Recommending financial resources.** There are a number of financial aid organizations and patient assistance programs available to help patients with their out-of-pocket expenses. Your pharmacist can be a good source of information about these resources.

**QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PHARMACIST**
- How should I take my pills?
- How does this medication work in the body to fight my cancer?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- How much will my pills cost?
- At what time of day should I take this pill?
- Should I take it with or without food?
- How much water should I drink when I take this pill?
- What are possible side effects, and which side effects require my calling the doctor?
- What type of co-payment assistance is available?