

Consumers Can Help Prevent Harmful Medication Incidents

## SafeMedicationUse.ca Newsletter

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### Illegible Prescriptions Can Lead to Errors

You've probably seen cartoons about doctors' terrible handwriting, but in real life it's not a laughing matter. SafeMedicationUse.ca recently received a report that highlights just how dangerous bad handwriting on prescriptions can be.

The handwriting on a child's prescription for the medicine dexamethasone was hard to read. As a result, the pharmacist misinterpreted the prescription and dispensed the wrong dose of medicine. Dexamethasone is a corticosteroid medicine that is used to treat many different conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis. Taking the wrong dose of dexamethasone could cause serious harm. Fortunately, in this case the mistake was discovered, and the child was unharmed.

It's widely recognized that bad handwriting on prescriptions can lead to medication errors. More and more doctors' offices are using computer-generated prescriptions as a way to avoid this problem, but even computerized systems are not perfect. They can introduce new types of errors, such as omission of important information or selection of the wrong medicine from a drop-down menu on the computer screen.



**Both consumers and healthcare professionals can play an active role in preventing errors caused by hard-to-read prescriptions. SafeMedicationUse.ca has the following suggestions:**

- **Talk to your prescriber:** Whenever you receive a prescription for a new medicine, review the details with your prescriber. Make sure you know the name and strength of the medication, how much to take, how to take it, and why you are taking it.
- **Read your prescription:** If you can't read the writing, ask your doctor to clarify the details or to print the prescription. Fixing the problem at this stage can help prevent delays or mistakes at the pharmacy. It will also help you to correctly update your own medication list.

Dr. Friendly  
Address  
Phone Number

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ M  
Age \_\_\_\_\_

Rx  
G H I J K  
*Amoxicil 250mg po tid x 7days*  
*Mtte 21 capsules*  
L

Refill: \_\_\_\_\_ times

Dr. \_\_\_\_\_  
License # 123456

Our consumer website  
**SafeMedicationUse.ca**  
provides information on  
how to read a prescription.

([www.safemedicationuse.ca/tools\\_resources/tips\\_prescription.html](http://www.safemedicationuse.ca/tools_resources/tips_prescription.html))

## Tips for Practitioners:

### Prescribers

- When prescribing a medicine, be sure the patient understands what the medication is and why it's needed.
- Use computer-generated prescriptions whenever feasible. If a handwritten prescription is unavoidable, consider printing the information rather than using cursive writing. Printing is especially important if you know that your handwriting is difficult to read.



### Pharmacists and Other Healthcare Providers

- When dispensing or administering medicines, ask patients what they know about the medicines they are receiving. If there are any discrepancies between what you see on the prescription and what the patient is telling you, contact the prescriber.
- Never make assumptions or take guesses. If you have any difficulty interpreting a handwritten prescription, always call the prescriber to request clarification.

## Medication Safety bulletins contribute to Global Patient Safety Alerts

This newsletter shares information about safe medication practices, is noncommercial, and is therefore exempt from Canadian anti-spam legislation.