Hazardous Medication Precautions

What are hazardous medications?

Sometimes, the best care involves medications that are helpful but very strong. They include:

- Chemotherapy: medications that keep certain cells from growing or acting abnormally
- Biotherapy: medications that boost the body’s immune system
- Immunosuppressants: medications that suppress the immune system

These medications are used to treat many conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, arthritis, and cancer. They’re given as pills, skin creams, injections, or through an intravenous (IV) line.

Because they affect cell growth or the immune system, these medications can be dangerous (hazardous) to other people or to pets. There is no reason to limit contact with a person using these medications, but special care needs to be taken to reduce the risks to others.

Safety in the hospital

If hazardous medications are given in the hospital or within 48 hours before you go to the hospital, healthcare providers and other staff will take some precautions. These involve special care with the medication, your body fluids, and soiled laundry.

You may see a sign in the hospital room or on the door reminding staff about steps they need to take.

Research shows that long-term exposure can harm healthcare workers who come into contact with these medications every day. Everyone taking extra care can reduce the risk.

Safety at home

If you’re given a hazardous medication to use at home, you will need to take steps to reduce the risk. Follow these guidelines:

- The medication should only be handled by the person taking it or the caregiver, if possible.
- Wash your hands before and after handling this medication.
- Wear latex or nitrile gloves when using all medications, except pills. Wash your hands before putting on the gloves and after removing them. When finished, throw the gloves away.
- If any medication spills, keep others away and clean up the spill right away. Wipe the area with a moist paper towel and dish detergent, then rinse. Use a spill kit if you are given one. Paper towels or cloths used to clean a spill can be put in the regular trash.
- If medication gets on the skin, wash and rinse the area using soap and a large amount of water. If the skin stays red for over an hour, call your doctor.
- If medication gets into the eye, flush the eye for 15 minutes using tap water. Seek emergency care.
- Call your pharmacist if you have questions.

See page 2 for notes about taking and handling each medication type.
Safety at home continued

Follow guidelines below to be safe with these types of medication:

• Capsules or tablets. Do not crush or break pills unless your doctor or pharmacist tells you to.

• Oral liquids. Use an oral syringe to measure each dose. This helps avoid spills. Store the syringe with the medication.

• Ointments or creams. Remember to wash hands both before and after putting on the gloves.

• IV or injected medications. Bag and dispose of supplies and empty containers in a single location in your household trash. Empty this container in the outside trash often.

Handling body fluids and laundry

While using the medication and for 48 hours after, take extra care with your body fluids and laundry.

• Protect your hands. Always wear latex or nitrile gloves when handling body fluids, washing linens, or changing diapers. Wash your hands after removing the gloves.

• Clean up body fluids. Immediately clean up body fluids (vomit, diarrhea, urine).

• Take extra steps to clean laundry soiled with body fluids or medication. Wash clothing, sheets, or other items right away, separate from other laundry. Use two wash/rinse cycles with hot water.

• Change diapers often, and dispose of them in one place. For young children taking the medication, change diapers often to reduce the contact time between the skin and body fluids. With each diaper change, completely clean the area. Choose one specific place to dispose of diapers, rather than using trash cans around the house. For example, use a bathroom diaper pail. Empty the container in the outside trash often.

Storing medication

The pharmacy may give you the medication in a resealable plastic bag. Store the medication in the same bag in a cool, dry place (not the bathroom). Keep it out of the reach of children and pets.

Disposing of medication

• Do not flush leftover medication down the toilet. Take any leftover oral medication or ointments to a medication disposal location.

• Infused or injected medications may require special handling. If you have unused or partially used doses of IV medication, call your pharmacist for directions.

Other general guidelines

• Do not share medications. Sharing can be dangerous with any medication, but this is especially true for hazardous medications.

• Use caution around pregnant or breastfeeding women. Women who are pregnant, breastfeeding, or who may become pregnant should NOT handle these medications.

• Take extra steps to avoid infection. Often, these medications interfere with the body’s ability to fight infections. While you are taking them, try to avoid contact with people who are sick, wash your hands often, and keep your home clean.

When to call your healthcare provider

• Side effects: Call your doctor about any unexpected or severe side effects such as rash, bleeding, or fever.

• Medication in the eyes or on the skin: Seek emergency care if medication gets in your eye. Call your doctor if your skin stays red for more than an hour after a spill is washed off.