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Questions to Ask about Medications

When a child or youth does not feel well, sometimes medications can help. First, a complete assessment of the child or youth’s mental and physical health must be done to make sure it is not just a one-time occurrence and that other things may not help; such as getting better sleep, making changes at school or home, or talking with a therapist.

Medications to help children or youth with their feelings, behavior, or how they are doing at school are most effective when children or youth also have a therapist involved. Additionally, the caregiver(s) and youth should know the following about the medications:

- Reason for the medication including target symptoms and mental health diagnoses,
- Alternative treatments in lieu of medication,
- Risks of the medications,
- Benefits of the medications,
- Possible drug interactions with the medications and;
- Who to call in an emergency about the medications

Medication prescribers may include the child or youth’s primary care provider (pediatrician), psychiatrist, nurse practitioner or physician assistant. A therapist such as a psychologist, social worker, or school counselor does not prescribe medications but often works with the prescriber to help describe how the youth may need help. Treatment with psychiatric medications is a serious matter for children and youth.

Preparing for your Visit with a Provider

Here are some tips about how to prepare for your visit with a provider who prescribe medication for mental health.

- Consider asking the following questions before taking psychiatric medications. It is important to be fully informed about the psychotropic medication you are prescribed.
- If, after asking these questions, you still have questions or doubts about medication treatment, ask for a second opinion.
- If you need assistance or have questions about this process, you should consider calling your social worker, probation officer, attorney, public health nurse, or a CASA worker.
- By asking and writing down the answers to the following questions, children, youth, and care givers will gain a better understanding of psychiatric medications.

Talking to the Prescriber

Review the following with the medication handout, prescription label and answer form

About the Medication:

1. Why am I taking this medication?
2. What are the names of the medication (generic and brand names)?
3. What is the safest daily dosage for me to take considering my age, height, weight, and other important lifestyle factors? How will I need to take the medication?
4. What is known about its degree of helpfulness with other children who have a similar condition? How might the medication help? What is unknown about this medication? Is it approved for children or adolescents?
5. How long before it works? How will I know it is working?
6. What is the cost of the medication (generic vs. brand name, compared to other drugs that could be indicated for use)? Will it be covered by Medi-Cal or insurance?

Side Effects, Risks and Monitoring:

1. What are the common side effects for this medication? If I experience these side effects, what is normal and when is it not?
2. What monitoring (e.g. heart tests, blood work, etc.) need to be done before starting the medication? What monitoring need to be done while I continue to take the medication? What is my status regarding monitoring?
3. What are the long-term health risks of the medication?
4. Is this medication addictive? Can it be abused?
5. What happens if this medication is combined with alcohol or other drugs?
6. What do I do if a problem develops – I feel ill, I miss doses, if side effects develop? When should I be concerned? Who should I call with concerns?
7. Who will check on me to see the medication is working or to check for any negative effects? How will progress be checked and by whom? Are they qualified to do so?
8. Who else in my life **needs** to be informed about this medication?
9. Whom should I contact with questions? In an emergency? If you are not there, whom should I talk to? What about after hours?

Length of Treatment, Alternatives and Long-Term Use Planning:

1. How long will I need to take this medication? How will the decision be made to stop this medication?
2. What happens when I turn 18, 21, and 26?
3. Are there treatments besides medication that might help?
4. What can I do at home or school to help with mental health besides medication?
5. If I don't feel comfortable taking this medication, what else could help me?
6. Would you feel comfortable giving this medication to your own child or relative? Would you take this yourself?

Talking to the Pharmacist

Review the following with the medication handout, prescription label & answer form

1. Can you review the list of medications I am currently taking or may take (include over the counter medications such as allergy medication, pain relievers, etc.)? Are there possible interactions between these medications and the new medications I am being prescribed?
2. What are the common side effects for this medication? If I experience these side effects, what is normal and when is it not?
3. Are there any other medications or foods to avoid while taking the medication? Should I eat food with the medication?
4. Are there any activities to avoid while taking the medication? Are any precautions recommended for other activities? Are there any weather conditions to avoid while taking this medication?
5. Can I stop taking the medication right away if I don't like how it makes me feel? If I do, is there anything I have to watch out for?
6. What happens if I miss a dose of this medication? Should I take it right away or wait until the next dosage?
7. What's the most important thing about this medication?
8. What happens if I take too much or take the wrong amount of this medication?
9. What happens if this medication is combined with alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs?
10. How long does the drug have its effect? How long does it take to wear off? How long will it be effective in my body?
11. (If relevant) Are there any special concerns about this medication and pregnancy?
12. What should I discuss with my prescriber before I take this medication?
13. How should the medication be stored or kept?

Talking to the Social Worker, Probation Officer and/or Public Health Nurse

At your check-ins, your social worker or probation officer should have these conversations with you.

- You can always say, "I'd like to talk to you about my medications and treatment plan."
 - Review the following with the medication handout, prescription label & answer form
1. Social Worker: Let's review the goals of the medication. Is the medication helping? How?
Your Response: (The medication helps with... The medication does not help with...)
 2. Social Worker: How do you feel emotionally and physically on the medication?
Your Response: (I feel _____, _____, _____ when I take the medication)
 3. Social Worker: Have any side effects developed? If so, can you describe them?
Your Response: (I've noticed that...)
 4. Social Worker: Has someone checked your weight, height, labs, or anything else since our last check-in?
Your Response: (Yes/No/Not sure)

5. Social Worker: Are you taking any other medications or drugs that may have unintended effects while taking your current prescription?
Your Response: (I take ... {name other medications, supplements, or drugs})
6. Social Worker: What other support or information might help with what you are experiencing? Are there services you need and are not receiving or are waiting for?
Your Response: (I would like/I need)
7. Social Worker: Here is a list of resources and services available in your area. Have you tried other treatments or services besides medication that seem to help? Is there anything you would like to try?
Your Response: (_____ really helps me, I'd like to do that. I'd like to try _____ to help with _____)
8. Social Worker: What are people at home or school doing to help with mental health besides medication?
Your Response: (At home _____ is happening. At school _____ is happening.)

Talking to the Attorney or Judge

You can always say, "I'd like to talk to you about my medications and treatment plan."

Review the following with the JV220a and JV222 forms, the medication handout, prescription label & answer form

1. What rights do I have?
2. Are my rights being upheld?

Questions to Ask about Medications Adapted from: [Psychiatric Medications for Children and Adolescents Part III: Questions to Ask](#) and <http://www.ohiomindsmatter.org/Parents.html>