

Medication Samples: What You Don't Know Could be Harmful

Drug companies often provide medication samples free of charge to doctors. Physicians then give these samples to patients at no cost. With nearly 46 million Americans lacking health insurance, these medication samples can be a tremendous blessing to patients, especially if the drug is expensive. However, when doctors give samples to patients, pharmacists are not involved. Patients then may miss out on valuable education about their medication. Some doctors are too busy to adequately explain to patients how their medication should be used or patients may forget the information that doctors do tell them.

Luckily, most drug samples contain some written information directly on the product or on a separate sheet of paper inside the box. This information is called consumer medication information, or CMI, and is provided by the drug company that makes the product. Previous studies have shown that this is often a patient's only source of information about drug samples. Unfortunately, problems have been identified with some CMI in the past. Specifically, many patients cannot read.



In addition, previous studies have found that CMI is often written at a level that is too complex for patients to understand. Therefore, some patients may leave the doctor's office without an accurate understanding of how or when a medication is intended to be used.

If this has ever happened to you, you are not alone. The majority of Americans do not understand health literature. Health literacy is defined as a patient's ability to understand health information and to use that information to promote health. A survey found that only 12% of adults have proficient health literacy. This means that about 9 out of every 10 American adults lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent or treat disease because they do not understand health literature. To make it easier for patients, it has been suggested that health information be written at or below a 6th grade reading

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Department of Health and Human Services "Quick Guide to Health Literacy Fact Sheet"
www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm

Institute for Safe Medicine Practices
www.ismp.org/Newsletters/consumer/alerts/Samples.asp

Based on "Do Medication Samples Jeopardize Patient Safety?" by Andrea S Franks, Shuanta' M Ray, Lorraine S Wallace, Amy J Keenum, and Barry D Weiss, *The Annals of Pharmacotherapy*, January 2009, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1345/aph.1L362>.

For Our Patients is provided by *The Annals* to help explain the latest research and information relating to your medications. These summaries are for informational purposes only and are not a substitute for professional advice from your personal medical provider. If you have questions about this material, you should discuss it with your physician or pharmacist. This summary may be reproduced without permission for not-for-profit educational purposes only. Any other use must be approved by the publisher.

© Copyright 2009, Harvey Whitney Books Company, www.hwbooks.com.

F0PL4 DOI 10.1345/fop.1L362

level. This gives more people the ability to read and understand the information.

A recent study looked at CMI on drug samples in doctors' offices to assess whether the health information accompanying the drugs was provided in a way that was useful to most adults. Past studies have evaluated CMI for tablets and capsules. This new study looked at other dosage forms like creams, lotions, inhalers, liquids, vaginal products, patches, injections, shampoos, and ear/eye drops. Fifty-five products were evaluated.

The study found that 22% of drug samples did not include any CMI. Patients who were given these samples might have walked out of their doctor's office with limited knowledge of these drugs. Of the samples with CMI, only 16% (4 products) were written at the recommended reading level. The authors found that 24% (6 products) were actually written at a 10th grade reading level or higher, which means that most adults would not have understood the information. The authors also noted that the print was often too small. Adults with vision problems would probably not have been able to see the information well enough to read it.

The major downside to this study is that it did not test patient understanding of the CMI that was provided. However, the study does provide

some important information: it showed that a majority of the CMI that accompanies non-pill forms of drug samples is written at a reading level that most patients cannot understand.

The next time you are given a drug sample by your doctor, make sure that you ask the doctor to explain the medication to you before you leave the office. It is important to know why you are taking a medication, how you should take it, and when you should use it. The doctor should also tell you what to expect from the medication, including both side effects and benefits to your health. You may even want to take notes about what the doctor tells you, especially if you are forgetful.

Don't forget to tell your pharmacist when you are taking medication samples. Your pharmacist can then check for interactions that the sample may have with other drugs that you are taking. This may also provide you with the opportunity to ask your pharmacist any questions you still have about the medicine.

While samples are a valuable way for many patients to save money, it is still important for patients to receive information about their medicines in a way that they can understand. Always ask a healthcare professional if you read any information and do not understand it or have questions. Ultimately, your health is at stake!