



# HEALTH

## Reading prescriptions<sup>1</sup>

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### Quick Facts...

Prices charged for the same drug product can vary substantially from one pharmacy to another.

Knowing how to read a prescription and shopping around will help consumers save money on prescription drugs.

A prescription includes the physician's name, address and signature, the patient's name, the date, the name of the prescribed drug, the dosage, strength and amount to be dispensed, directions for use and the number of times the prescription can be refilled, if any.

Dosage strength is commonly given in metric measures.

Ever since the Supreme Court ruled on a suit that challenged the authority of the Virginia State Board of Pharmacies to ban commercial advertising of prescription drugs, drug stores all over the country may advertise their drug prices, if they choose.

Surveys of a number of communities show that prices charged for the same drug product can vary substantially from one pharmacy to another, depending in some cases on the services provided. Knowing how to read a prescription and shopping around will help consumers save money on prescription drugs.

There is no mystery about today's prescriptions, once you learn to read them. Written on a pre-printed form, it includes the physician's name and address, patient's name, date, name of the prescribed drug, dosage, strength of the dose, amount to be dispensed, directions for use, and the number of times the prescription can be refilled, if at all. The physician's signature appears at the bottom of the form.

Since virtually all drugs come ready-made from pharmaceutical manufacturers, a physician does not need to list an assortment of ingredients. Instead, the physician writes the name of the prescribed drug, using either the manufacturer's trade name or the generic or common name. The dosage form, if there is a choice, will be indicated by an abbreviation such as "cap" for capsule or "tab" for tablet. Liquids usually are denoted as "el," "sy," or "sol" for elixir, syrup or solution. Dosage strength is now commonly given in metric measures such as "50 mg," meaning 50 milligrams.

If the drug is to be taken three times a day for seven days, the doctor will write "#21" or "21." Refill information probably will be indicated in an abbreviated form, such as "Refill 2x," meaning the patient can obtain the same amount of the drug two more times without obtaining a new prescription.

The only place on the prescription where Latin still appears is in the directions for use. This is done only as a matter of convenience--a kind of medical shorthand--not as a way of hiding information from the patient, since the doctor usually explains when the drug is to be taken at the time he or she writes the prescription, and the pharmacist translates the Latin abbreviations into English on the label put on the drug container.

One symbol from the past that probably will never change is "Rx," which has come to mean "prescription." The origins of this symbol are given as an abbreviation of the Latin word "recipe," meaning "take thou" or "you take," or as a representation of the sign of Jupiter.

Table 1: Common prescription symbols.

Latin	Abbreviation	Meaning
ad libitum	ad lib.	freely, as needed
anti cibos	a.c.	before meals
bis in die	b.i.d.	twice a day
capsula	caps.	capsule
gutta	gtt.	drop
hora somni	h.s.	at bedtime
per os	P.O.	orally
pro re nata	PRN	as needed
quaque 4 hora	q.4h	every 4 hours
quater in die	q.i.d.	4 times a day
repetatur	REP.	refill
ter in die	t.i.d.	3 times a day
ut dictum	Ut dict., UD	as directed

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BYRD No. Aft 8741906  
Office hours by appointment.

Name *Ms. Licia Edwards* Date *11-16-77*  
Address *1911 Belfield Road*  
B.

*Tetracycline mgms. 250*  
*Capsules No. 16*  
*Sig: one capsule q 6 h*

REP. *0* 1-2-3 PRN *John H. Jones* M.D.

The sample prescription shown in Figure 1 calls for 16 capsules of tetracycline in a dosage strength of 250 milligrams per capsule. The abbreviation "Sig.," written under the prescription itself, tells the pharmacist the instructions for the patient that should appear on the container label. In this instance, the patient is instructed

to take one capsule every 6 hours. The printed letters "REP.," followed by a series of numbers in the lower left-hand corner of the prescription, indicates the number of times it can be refilled without obtaining a new prescription from the doctor. This prescription cannot be refilled.

<sup>1</sup>This information is from *Consumer News*, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Consumer Affairs, Vol. 7, No. 21, Nov. 1, 1977. Reviewed by Laurel M. Kubin, assistant director for consumer and family education. 9/95.