



# Skill Building for Medication Self-Management

*NHCHC Health Management Toolkit*

2025

Skill building focuses on developing new skills, methods, or techniques with the client so that they can independently (or more independently) complete health management tasks.

- Skill building requires specific, organized approaches to learn new skills, and often requires multiple opportunities to practice over time, with decreasing levels of support from the provider.
- Skill building is appropriate when there is a skill that a person needs to learn to manage independently, adaptive strategies are not available, existing supports are temporary, or the person is motivated or interested in being more independent in a skill.

**Medication self-management** encompasses the organization of and adherence to a prescribed medication regimen.

It also includes the ability to understand the purpose and intended impact of medications, how to recognize and report side effects, decision making around medication (for example, a missed dose), and communicating with health care professionals about one's experience with medications.

Skill building for medication self-management focuses on increasing a person's ability to read, understand, and follow through on medication instructions and information.

Providers can first [assess a person's medication self-management skills](#) to determine what skill building is needed and what strategies may be most effective and useful to the client.

## Strategies to Build Medication Self-Management Skills

There are a number of tools available to support both staff and individuals with learning medication management skills.

Support for Staff: [Improving the Effectiveness of Medication Review: Guidance from the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit](#)

Support for Clients:

- Pill box support – see the suggested handout on “Filling a Pillbox”
- Diabetes-specific resources
  - [Reading a syringe](#)
  - [Taking insulin](#)

- [How to use an insulin pen](#)
- *Note: [a one-time fee of \\$25 is needed to use learningaboutdiabetes.org resources as an organization](#)*

#### Medication Refills and Navigating Pharmacies:

- Assist the person in reading medication labels and calculating when refills need to be called in or requested.
- Identify and use strategies to remind the person to refill their medications at the appropriate time, including assisting them to set up automatic refills with reminders from the pharmacy.
- Practice calling in refills including:
  - Having needed information available
  - Dialing the number and navigating phone trees
  - Reading and accurately typing the Rx number
  - Asking for the pharmacist if they are having trouble using the automated system
- Using calendars/reminders to pick-up medications once filled.
- Having items needed to pick-up medications such as IDs, co-pays.
- Understanding the steps for picking up some medications (e.g. reading and signing for specific classes of medications).
- Identifying questions ahead of time to ask the pharmacist (as needed).
- Identifying options/solutions for potential problems.
- [Video on teaching how to refill medications](#) that can be used for providers to learn how to teach this skill or with clients to learn and practice skills together.

#### Reading Medication Labels:

- Focus education on learning to read the person's own medications (instead of sample medication labels).
- Start with learning the most important parts of the label first, such as:
  - Medication name and dose
  - Dosing instructions
  - Refill date
  - Rx/refill number
- Then expand to explaining/understanding other sections of the label, such as:
  - Side effects/warnings
  - Prescribing provider information

- Practice the person reading and following medication dosing instructions:
  - Use the teach back method or have the person demonstrate different variations of dosing instructions.
    - Start with medicine the person currently has, but then expand to be able to understand and follow additional instructions for newly prescribed medications.
- [Video on teaching how to read medication labels](#) that can be used for providers to learn how to teach this skill or with clients to learn and practice skills together.

#### Filling a Pillbox:

- Use the skill building strategies presented at the beginning of this toolkit to break the task of filling a pillbox into smaller steps.
- Understand that if the person has multiple medications, this can be a very cognitively tiring task.
- First, focus on ensuring the person is able to identify what each of the slots mean (morning, noon, evening, and the day of the week).
- Also ensure the person is able to identify what day and what time of day it is currently.
  - You may first need to practice/learn strategies to identify the current date and time to make the pillbox meaningful.
  - Provide education on what to do if the person realizes they have missed a dose.
- When first learning, have the person start with a simple medication (e.g. one time a day, or one for which they are very familiar with the dosing instructions), and then provide support for additional medications.
  - Over time, progress to providing less support with subsequent medications and have the person fill the pillbox more independently.
  - Assist with problem solving less direct dosing or more complex dosing (e.g. if they have two medicines for the morning, but one is without food and one is with food; if the medication just says 1x/daily, identifying the best time to take the medicine).
- A sign that the person may need ongoing support/adaptive support (e.g. someone filling the pillbox for them) is if they are unable to generalize the skill to new medications or they require prompting to repeat the skills with each medication despite continued practice.
- Consider providing rubber bands to go over pillboxes to prevent them from opening in a crowded bag; this is especially important when people carry them at all times.
- [Video on organizing medications and using a pill box](#) that can be used for providers to learn how to teach this skill or with clients to learn and practice skills together.

For more tools and strategies, please see the full Health Management Toolkit available from <https://nhchc.org/resource/health-management-toolkit>

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