


# Sticking To Your Meds While Stuck Behind Bars:

## Tips from a Prison Doctor

by Sarah Roskam Leibel

You woke up nauseated in your cell and decided to skip a dose. You transferred facilities but your medications didn't transfer with you. You ran out of commissary and didn't have food to take your meds. Or, you just forgot to take them. Ever happened to you before? Sticking to any medication regimen isn't easy, particularly when it's as complicated as the average HIV treatment combination. Add prison bars to the mix and you may be facing some real challenges to medication adherence. Despite these challenges, there are many things you can do to stay on track with your HIV meds while incarcerated.

I asked Dr. Frederick Altice, Director of the HIV in Prisons Program at Yale University and a health care provider for the Connecticut Department of Corrections, for some tips to help HIV+ prisoners take their medications. In addition to considering his suggestions, work towards establishing an effective relationship with a doctor or nurse at your facility who understands your needs. Discuss with him or her why it is important to take medications regularly and as prescribed. Taking medications is a team effort and it is up to you to create a winning team.

You may feel that you have little control over managing your own life while incarcerated, but here's a list of tips to help you control your disease and manage your own health. 

*Interview with Frederick L. Altice, M.D., Yale University AIDS Program, by Sarah Roskam Leibel, an HIV treatment advocate in San Francisco.*

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### Challenges

to taking your meds

### Tips

for sticking to your meds

#### Forgetfulness

- **Establish a routine.** For example, take your meds when you brush your teeth, attend a meeting, show up for work duties, or eat your meals.
- **Plan ahead** for changes in your schedule. If you know that you will be having visitors one day and will be missing an activity, take your meds with you so you don't miss them too.
- **Ask for reminders.** If you have a buddy you trust, ask him or her to help remind you.

#### Side Effects

*Remember, most side effects can be easily treated with other medications!*

- **Ask your doctor to provide something** for your symptoms, and to keep it available for when you need it.
- **Contact your provider** for help with your medications – many can now be exchanged for another effective medication.

#### Fear of Disclosure

*(Confidentiality Issues)*

- **Hide your meds** in a locker, or in clothing, like a pants leg.
- **Write a medical grievance** insisting that people wait at least 15 feet behind the medication window.

#### Getting to the Med Line

- **Establish relationships with officers** to allow you to go to med line during activities. You don't need to disclose your HIV status to do this; explain how important it is that you take your medication regularly so you don't get sick.

#### Refilling Medications

- **Keep track** of your medication supply (try making a calendar).
- **Put refill orders in early.**
- **Remind** health care staff regularly to refill your supply.

#### Timing of Medications

*For medications that require an empty stomach but med line occurs at mealtimes...*

*For medications that require food but med line does not occur with meals...*

- **Ask** to keep that specific medication on you.
- **Bring along your commissary or ask** to be prescribed a snack with med line.

#### Inter-Facility Transfer

- **Make sure your records and medications are traveling with you.** Ask the correctional officer before leaving.