



# MEDICINES – WHEN AND HOW THEY CAN HELP US

## THE IDEA

Everyone has taken medicine at some time. Medicines help us in many ways. But often medicines are not necessary, and we can get well without them. One problem is that people often expect the health worker to prescribe lots of medicines, and to give them injections when they are sick. In many cases it is enough to get plenty of rest, plenty to drink, and good food to eat to help the body fight off the disease and get better.

When we take medicine we must be careful where we get it from, and how we take it. If children learn the correct facts about medicines and how to use them safely, they can help to improve the health practices of their family.

### A story

Sara's baby had a bad cold. She took him to the health worker and asked for an injection. The health worker told Sara that the baby did not need an injection, and that he would get better with rest, good food and lots to drink. But Sara did not believe her. She went to a man in the market who gave the baby an injection and asked for a lot of money. Four days later, Sara's baby had a high fever and a hot, red sore where he had been injected, because the man had used a dirty needle. Sara was very worried and went again to the health centre. She now believed the health worker's advice.



## How are medicines used?

Medicines which prevent diseases Some medicines and vaccines protect us from certain diseases. Babies must be immunised against different dangerous diseases. There is medicine to help prevent HIV passing from a mother to her baby.

### Medicines may be given in different ways:

- in tablets (or capsules)
- in ointment
- in liquid or drops
- by injection

### Where and how these activities have been used

Many medicines have undesirable side-effects so it is important to take them only when we really need them, when they are really useful and above all to follow the instructions carefully. The topic, though considered very important by WHO, is usually left out of school health education syllabuses. It is a very worthwhile and valuable one. Apart from its medical importance it is particularly important as a social studies topic. We should investigate:

- Why people buy medicines
- How sellers (including advertisers) sell them
- How we can begin to find the difference between what we really need, and what we do not.

It is important that families know how to use medicines correctly.

**Medicines which cure diseases** Some medicines cure certain diseases. There are different medicines for different diseases. Diseases must be treated as soon as possible before they become too serious. When a child is very ill (e.g. very high fever; breathing very quickly; vomiting; blood in faeces or severe diarrhoea), they should be taken at once to a trained health worker who will know which medicine to give. Some medicines cure in a short time, others take a very long time (e.g. the medicine for tuberculosis takes at least six months to cure). People living with HIV need medicine quickly to treat any infection.

**Medicines which help us feel better but do not cure** Many diseases or health problems, such as colds, flu, or most cases of diarrhoea cannot be cured by medicines. They must be cured by the body itself.

Sometimes we take medicine when we have a fever or headache or stomach ache. This helps the pain to go, but does not cure the disease which causes the pain. After a few hours the pain will come back. It will not go away until our body has cured the disease.

**Medicines which control diseases** There are some diseases which cannot be cured but can be kept under control by taking medicine regularly. For example, a person with asthma, diabetes or some kinds of heart disease needs to take medicine regularly to keep as well as possible. Some people need to take medicine all their lives. Medicines for people living with HIV can help to keep them healthy.

When looking after sick people, give them:

- plenty of clean water and other drinks.
- good food. Young children should eat a small amount many times a day.
- the right amount of medicine at the right time.
- always continue the medicine until the course has finished, even if the person feels better.

## Home remedies and traditional cures

Many home remedies have great value, some have less. Some may even be dangerous or harmful. Home remedies, like modern medicine, must be used carefully.

## Home remedies that help

For many diseases, home remedies work as well as or even better than modern medicines. They are often cheaper, and in some cases safer. For example, teas made from herbs and plants can help coughs, colds and indigestion. Older people may know which plants in their area are useful for certain complaints. Children can make sure that a person with diarrhoea drinks plenty of liquids (see Activity Sheet 6.1 **Caring for Children with Diarrhoea**).

## Home remedies that harm

Good home cures must not be confused with unhygienic practices which may harm people. For instance, animal dung may contain dangerous germs and must never be applied to a wound or to the umbilicus of a newborn baby.

We should only use home remedies if we are sure that they are safe and we know how to use them. If someone is seriously ill and has a high fever, it is safer to treat their disease with modern medicines on the advice of a health worker.

## Misunderstandings about medicines

Many people believe that if they are ill they must take some medicine. We should realise that our bodies will recover from most diseases, whether we take medicines or not. When people go to the health worker, they expect to be given some medicine, and are disappointed if they get none. *Medicines are expensive and cost money which could be used for buying good food.* It is also dangerous to over-use medicines when they are not necessary.

Many people believe that it is better to take medicine by injection rather than by mouth. Most medicines work just as well, or better, when taken by mouth. Injections should only be given for particular diseases and for immunisation. Receiving an injection from an untrained person can be very dangerous. If needles are not cleaned and sterilised (by being boiled in water), they can spread diseases, including HIV.

It is dangerous to take the wrong medicine, or too much medicine. It is wrong to believe that a larger dose of medicine will make a person get well quicker. It could even kill.

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### CHILD-TO-CHILD TRUST

It is also wrong to take too little and not to finish all the medicine.

The people who make medicines and beauty products often try to make us buy them through attractive, misleading advertisements, e.g. an advertisement for a vitamin tonic might say, 'This tonic will make you strong and clever.' We know which foods have the vitamins and minerals we need to eat to grow well and strong (see Activity Sheets 2.1 and 2.2 **Feeding Young Children**). Therefore it is much more sensible to spend money to buy these foods than to buy an expensive bottle of tonic which may be useless.



### Where do we get our medicines?

We must be careful where we get our medicines. Sometimes medicines are kept too long, or left in the heat, in the sunlight, or damp places. In these cases they may become useless, and sometimes could be dangerous. The label on the medicines should have a date. If that date has passed, the medicine may be bad.

### The dangers of medicines for young children

Young children often swallow medicines thinking they are sweets or nice drinks. Some common medicines can easily kill young children if they take too much. We must prevent this by keeping medicines out of young children's reach. Iron medicines (Fersolute) given to many pregnant mothers are particularly dangerous.

Children need different treatment from adults. They get different illnesses and need different doses (amounts) of medicines.

Some common medicines like aspirin can harm babies. Children and pregnant women should only take medicines on the advice of a health worker.

## Safe use of medicines

Children can help themselves and their families to use medicines safely and correctly. Here are some simple rules:

- Only use a medicine when it is needed. Often rest, good food and lots to drink are enough to help a person get better.
- Listen carefully to instructions from the health staff, or read the label. Help others to understand these instructions.
- Make sure that all medicine containers have instruction labels.
- Take the medicine if possible with food at the right times, and in the right amounts. Always finish the full course of medicine, even if you feel better, otherwise the medicine might not work so well next time.
- Don't share medicines with anyone else. Keep all medicine in a cool place out of the reach of young children.
- Only adults and responsible older children should give medicines to children. Young children should never give medicines to themselves or to other children.

## Activities

### Finding out

#### *The children can find out:*

- What are the most common local diseases?
- What medicines or cures are given for them?
- Where can people get these medicines or cures?
- Do people spend a lot of money on them?
- Are these medicines necessary?
- Do some people make their own cures?
- What kind of cures? Are they helpful or harmful?
- When people are sick, who helps and advises them?
- Do people expect to be given medicines or injections when they go to the health worker?

- What medicines are kept at home? Are they stored out of the reach of small children?
- How much is a bottle of 'tonic' (medicine which is supposed to make us strong)? Compare the price of one bottle of tonic with an orange, a kilo of green vegetables, or other local nutritious foods. Which is the best use of money?

The children can visit the health centre to find out more about the use of medicines.

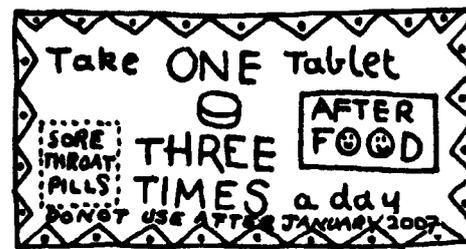
## Discussing

- The health worker can discuss with the children about the different kinds of medicines, when they are necessary and when they are not, and how we can use them safely.
- The health worker can bring some empty medicine bottles with instructions written on the labels, and the children can practise reading and understanding the instructions.
- Children can discuss together with teachers, parents and health workers how they can promote the safe use of medicines, and decide on action which they can take to help their families and neighbours.

## Taking action

**Older children can help in many different ways:**

- Help the parents when a small child does not like taking medicine by amusing the small child, telling them stories, persuading them, singing to them, and rewarding them when they take it.



- Think of ways to give tablets to young children. One way is to mix the tablets with a little sweet liquid. In preparing this follow these steps:
  - 1 Wash your hands.
  - 2 Follow the health worker's instructions and take the right amount of tablet.
  - 3 Put the tablet in a cup and crush it into powder with a spoon, or use two spoons to crush it.
  - 4 Mix the powdered tablet with a little clean water (no more than 2 spoonfuls), milk, sugar, porridge or other food to make it easier for the child to take.
  - 5 Give the mixture to the child with the spoon or from the cup. It may be necessary to hold down the child's hands.
  - 6 If the child spits out the mixture, give one more dose, perhaps trying a different method.

The children can discuss this idea with their parents and help them next time a small child needs to take tablets.

- Help feed sick children in small quantities frequently and keep them clean. Remember: Always wash your hands before and after looking after a sick person.
- Check that a sick child has taken the medicine regularly by making a chart and ticking off the times when the child has taken the medicine, and making sure the child finishes the course.
- Make drinks like herbal teas, rice water, and the special drink (ORS) and give it slowly and frequently to children when they have diarrhoea.
- Make a label with instructions for taking medicine. Include: the dose; how to take it; when to take it; how often to take it; for how many days.
- Read medicine labels for people who cannot read, and remind them to take their medicine. This is very important for

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### CHILD-TO-CHILD TRUST

people taking medicine over a long period.

### Passing on the message

The children can help to spread these messages to their family and community in many ways:

- **Make up a play or a puppet show** For example, acting the story of a false doctor who comes to the village with bottles full of different coloured water. He makes a long speech which the people believe. They buy his medicines and he goes away with a lot of money. No one gets better. He comes back next year, but this time the people chase him away.
- **Draw posters** to show the rules about safe use of medicines, e.g.
  - sick people need good food and plenty to drink.
  - medicines should be kept out of the reach of young children.
- **Make up songs** with these health messages and teach them to their friends.
- **Write stories** like the one about Sara and her baby. Other stories could be about:
  - How the family learned that Grandmother's herbal drink and Grandfather's oranges were the best treatment for little Abdullah's cold.
  - How Mimi helped her brother take his medicine safely.
  - How foolish Arthur took all his medicine at once and nearly died.
- **Find an advertisement** for some kind of medicine and discuss it with friends. What does it say? What does the picture tell us? Should we believe it? Why or why not?

### Follow-up

- Children can make up quizzes to test each other on the facts about safe use of medicine.
- They can keep records about the diseases in their families and the treatment which was given. How many times have they taken medicine? Who advised this? Have they helped anyone to take medicine correctly? Have they treated cases of coughs, colds and diarrhoea with medicine or with plenty of liquids and good food? What happened? How many injections have been given other than for immunisation? The children can keep these records over a few months and compare their findings.
- They can find out whether people still expect always to be given medicine or injections when they go to the health worker.

### USING THIS SHEET

There are many ways in which **older children** can help their families use medicines safely. **Health workers** can help older children understand these messages and plan together how they can pass on these messages at the clinic and at community meetings. **Teachers** can do the activities with children in different lessons at school and in the community. **Youth group leaders**, including **Scout** and **Guide leaders**, can involve children and young people. They can develop an achievement badge for which children need to demonstrate how they have understood and helped others to use medicines safely and wisely.