

Responding to Med Errors

(full update July 2024)

One of the greatest fears of healthcare professionals is to be involved in an error. Despite diligent pharmacy staff and safeguards to improve medication safety, errors slip through during the drug distribution process. It's critical to know how to proceed when a med error occurs.^{1,8} Be prepared, such as by reviewing pharmacy policies and procedures.³ Brush up on your soft skills, since you'll need to be ready to personally address the issue with the patient. Also know requirements of your malpractice insurance, such as prompt notification and full cooperation, so coverage isn't jeopardized. Below is a checklist with general actions that should be taken when responding to medication errors.

Goal	Suggested Approach
Gather information from the patient.	☐ Take all comments and questions that hint at an error seriously.³ ☐ Remain calm and professional. Don't let personal feelings (e.g., defensiveness, panic) impede your response.^{3,5} ☐ Give the patient your full attention.⁶ Move the conversation to a private area.⁶ ☐ Use active listening to get details from the patient or family member's perspective.^{5,6} ☐ Assess for potential patient harm and take appropriate action.^{4,7} ☐ Show empathy and don't make excuses. For example, avoid using language such as "calm down" or "we were very busy."⁵ ☐ Acknowledge the patient's concern that an error may have been made. Let them know it will be promptly and thoroughly addressed.⁵ ☐ Don't be afraid to apologize sincerely, if appropriate, such as by saying "I'm sorry this happened to you." (But do follow pharmacy policy, which may vary depending on legal advice, state laws, etc).^{2,3,6}
Investigate what happened.	☐ If you're not a pharmacist, get the pharmacist involved right away. ☐ Secure potentially pertinent evidence.⁴ ☐ Gather additional information from the prescription hard copy, your computer system, staff interviews, and other pertinent sources.^{4,7} ☐ Compare what happened to pertinent policies and procedures to see if they were followed.⁴
Address the error. <i>Continued...</i> Address the error.	☐ Communicate about an error with the patient and if needed, the prescriber. Be honest about what happened.^{3,5} ○ The pharmacist should contact the prescriber to explain the situation and determine the best course of action.³ Be ready to tell them the patient's status, facts about the error, and what has been done so far. ○ The pharmacist should explain the situation to the patient and counsel on potential effects of the error.⁵

Goal	Suggested Approach
continued	☐ Prioritize fixing the problem. For example, expedite the dispensing of the correct med while collecting the wrong med from the patient. ☐ Give the patient a reasonable timeline, if the issue can't be fixed right away, and keep them in the loop when the problem is resolved. ☐ If the patient can't or doesn't want to return to the pharmacy, consider using your pharmacy's delivery or mail-order service, if available. ☐ Make a note in the patient's profile so other staff will be aware of what happened.³
Reduce error risk.	☐ Be transparent about an error internally, such as with pharmacy staff.³ ☐ Report an error appropriately, sticking to just the facts. It's generally best if a person who was involved or witnessed the error makes the report.³ ☐ Follow pharmacy policy for internal reporting, meeting required timelines, etc. ☐ Adhere to your state board of pharmacy or provincial college requirements for reporting. ☐ Report externally, such as to the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP, https://home.ecri.org/pages/ecri-ismp-error-reporting-system) in the US or to ISMP Canada (www.ismp-canada.org/err_ipr.htm) in Canada, to alert colleagues nationwide. ☐ Determine and implement strategies to help prevent the same or similar errors in the future.⁵ ☐ Keep the principles of Just Culture in mind. For example, say "Why or how did this happen?" not "Whose fault is this?" and support the staff who were involved, also referred to as "second victims."⁵

Users of this resource are cautioned to use their own professional judgment and consult any other necessary or appropriate sources prior to making clinical judgments based on the content of this document. Our editors have researched the information with input from experts, government agencies, and national organizations. Information and internet links in this article were current as of the date of publication.

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