

GUIDE · 5 MIN READ

When a loved one with dementia refuses their medication

It is one of the most stressful parts of caregiving — and almost always solvable with small changes to routine, format, and language. Here's how to work through it without an argument.

Why it happens

- They don't believe they're sick — common in dementia, especially with anosognosia (lack of insight). Arguing rarely works.
- The pill tastes bitter, is too big to swallow, or hurts going down. Many older adults have undiagnosed swallow problems.
- Side effects — nausea, drowsiness, dizziness. They may not link the pill to feeling bad, but they remember the bad feeling.
- Mistrust of the person giving it — particularly after an argument, or with a new home health aide.
- Routine has been broken — different cup, different room, different time, different person.
- Paranoia or hallucinations — they think the pill is poison or 'not theirs'.

What actually helps

- Same time, same place, same cup, same person where possible. Boring routine wins.
- Hand them the pill — don't put it in their mouth. Autonomy is more often the unlock than people expect.

- Ask the PCP or pharmacist for a different format: liquid, dissolvable, patch, sublingual. Most common medications have alternatives.
- Hide-in-food (covert administration) is an ethical and legal decision in the US too — only with the PCP and pharmacist's documented input, never quietly.
- Pair the medication with something they enjoy — coffee, a favorite cookie, the morning news.
- Drop the word 'medicine'. 'Here's your morning pill, Mom' is often refused; 'Here's the one Dr. Patel asked you to take' is often accepted.
- If refused, walk away calmly and try again in 20 minutes. Persisting in the moment makes the next attempt harder.
- Don't crush pills without checking — some (extended-release, enteric-coated) become dangerous when crushed. Always ask the pharmacist.

When to call the PCP today

Missed doses of heart, seizure, diabetes, Parkinson's, or blood-thinning medication for more than 24 hours — call the PCP's office or a nurse line today. For everything else, log the refusals and discuss at the next visit: there is almost always a kinder alternative.

Log refusals in two taps

The Care Companion's daily log captures every missed dose and the reason — so the PCP and pharmacist can change what's not working. 7-day free trial.

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General guidance, not medical advice. Covert administration is a legal decision and must always involve the PCP and pharmacist. In an emergency call 911.

Free guide from The Care Companion — practical tools for families caring for someone with dementia. More guides at thecarecompanion.com/guides