

# How to Increase Compliance with Rosacea Treatments

Eight tips to help patients comply with treatment regimens for positive outcomes.

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# How to Increase Compliance with Rosacea Treatments

Eight tips to help patients comply with treatment regimens for positive outcomes.

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## 1. Recognize Poor Compliance

Rosacea is a common skin condition, affecting 16 million Americans. Symptoms of this chronic inflammatory skin condition include easy blushing or flushing, persistent facial redness, inflammatory papules and pustules, telangiectasias, and skin discomfort including burning, stinging or itching. Rosacea can have a large emotional impact as well, with decreased quality of life and avoidance of public or social engagements due to embarrassment over physical symptoms. Although patients suffering with rosacea would have every reason to want to get better, many patients do not use their medications as prescribed. Poor compliance should always be considered, but especially in patients in whom the prescribed treatment is not working as well as expected.

Many patients don't want to disappoint their physicians and therefore may not be forthcoming about poor adherence. The physician should inquire about compliance in a non-threatening way; for example, "How many times per week do you use the medication? Once or twice?" This may encourage the patient to paint a realistic picture of his or her medication use, understanding that the physician does not expect perfection. The physician may also ask that the patient bring his or her medication tubes and containers to the follow-up visit, and ascertain the maximum amount of medication that the patient has used by examining the containers. This approach must be taken cautiously, as patients may dump some medication without using it, again aiming to appease the physician.

## 2. Foster Trust

The patient's experience in the physician's office begins upon entering the office building. The patient may be put off by signs referencing payment policies or an unkempt waiting area, thus perceiving the physician as greedy or unprofessional. Of course, every patient values his or her time, and long wait times will assure a disgruntled patient who may not return for follow-up, anticipating another unpleasant experience. Receptionists and nursing staff, who interact with the patient before the physician enters the picture, are paramount to promoting a professional and friendly office environment.

When the physician enters the exam room, the diagnosis and treatment plan may be formulated within a few seconds. However, it is essential to assure the patient that you have performed an adequate examination and addressed each of his or her concerns. Touching the patient's skin and examining areas up close, pausing over areas that the patient is concerned about, will reassure the patient that he or she received a thorough examina-



Figure.

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tion from a caring doctor. Further, discussing the treatment plan with the patient will encourage the patient to play an active role in his or her treatment, thereby improving the chances that he or she will use the prescribed medication.

## 3. Educate Patients

Rosacea is a heterogeneous disorder with several potential manifestations, which may be confusing for patients. Although the exact cause of rosacea is not yet known, a basic explanation of the disease process should be tailored to the patient's level of understanding, and specific questions answered as appropriate. The chronic nature of rosacea should be explained at the time of diagnosis and reinforced at subsequent interactions, so that patient expectations are aligned with the capability of currently available treatments. Patients may be directed to educational resources, such as the American Acne & Rosacea Society and the National Rosacea Society, and provided with informational materials at the office visit. Patients are more likely to have confidence in the prescribed medication if the treatment is explained in the context of rosacea pathogenesis as a chronic inflammatory condition, and if the message is reinforced from multiple sources, such as recommended on the Internet or on a Web site dedicated to the topic of rosacea. One important topic to discuss with patients is avoidance of trigger factors such as hot or spicy foods, alcoholic beverages, extreme temperatures, sunlight, wind and strenuous exercise. Emotional stress may also aggravate rosacea symptoms, though this trigger is more difficult to avoid. Further, patients may have tried topical corticosteroid medications to soothe facial skin irritation; the propensity for topical corticosteroid medications to cause flaring of rosacea should be explained.

#### 4. Involve Patients in the Treatment Plan

A number of treatment options exist for rosacea, and the prescribed regimen should be tailored to the individual patient's symptoms and goals of treatment. Both topical and oral medications are readily available, and the risks and benefits of each should be discussed. Topical medications are generally considered safe for long-term use, but patients may find the long-term commitment to daily medication application burdensome or may have trouble remembering to apply the medication. Some topical medications for rosacea may cause stinging or irritation when applied, or may be associated with an unpleasant smell. For these reasons, a patient may find it more convenient to simply "take a pill," or may perceive an oral medication as more effective than topical treatments.

Patients may misunderstand the reasons for using oral and topical antibiotic medications to treat a non-infectious disorder. They may have concerns about the potential side effects associated with oral antibiotic use, especially given the increasing public awareness of bacterial resistance. A newer 40-mg delayed-dose doxycycline (Oracea) does not cross the antimicrobial threshold and doesn't promote bacterial resistance, yet is effective for inflammatory lesions of rosacea. Other side effects typically caused by antibiotics, such as yeast infections and photosensitivity, also are not seen with this anti-inflammatory dose of doxycycline. Whatever the circumstances for an individual patient, he or she should have an important voice in determining the treatment regimen. Educated patients know which medications they are most likely to use and should be encouraged to participate in treatment planning for the best outcome for both patient and physician.

#### 5. Simplify Treatment Regimens

Given the variety of medication combinations that may be prescribed for rosacea, patients may come to your office after failing a number of regimens. After all, if they had already found a satisfying, effective treatment, they wouldn't be in your office! Patients may become discouraged with the complexity or lack of efficacy of prescribed regimens, and may be resistant to trying yet another medication when so many others have failed at improving symptoms. Simplifying the treatment regimen encourages better understanding of physician expectations and improves patients' self-efficacy — the belief that they can execute the treatment plan as prescribed. These considerations are particularly important in rosacea, as combinations of oral and topical medications are often prescribed. Regimen simplification begins with consideration of a topical medication vehicle that the patient is willing to use. A vehicle that is perceived as messy, time consuming, or associated with unpleasant sensations such as burning or itching is not likely to be used. With both oral and topical medication regimens, patients appreciate once-a-day medication dosing in order to minimize disruption of daily routine. Patients may benefit from tips to remember to use their medications — pill containers for oral medications, or placing a tube of topical medication next to the toothpaste or in some other location that the patient is not likely to miss.

#### Key Issues in Rosacea Adherence Management

- Rosacea may manifest various symptoms and patients may be misinformed about the cause or treatment of their disease.
- Just because patients are suffering with rosacea, doesn't mean they're using their medications.
- Patients may have failed numerous past treatments due to the chronic nature of rosacea.
- Educate patients about trigger factors and the goals of treatment.
- Discuss treatment options, including oral and topical medications, and involve patients in the treatment plan.
- Utilize medications with once-per-day dosing when possible.
- Advise patients of potential medication side effects and remedies, such as taking oral antibiotic medications with food to avoid stomach upset.
- Determine the patient's financial limitations and formulate the treatment plan accordingly. Inform patients about assistance programs when available.

Modern technology may be employed by patients savvy in its use, such as setting a daily reminder on a cell phone at the time medication should be taken. Whatever the means, the goal is to incorporate medication use into the patient's daily routine in order to minimize the burden of treatment and the number of skipped doses.

#### 6. Don't Scare Patients Needlessly

Federal regulations require full disclosure of the range of adverse effects that may be experienced with use of a given drug, but lengthy package inserts may intimidate patients or discourage them from using the prescribed regimen. It is important to discuss the most commonly experienced adverse effects of a prescribed medication at the office visit, before the prescription is ever filled. Medication information sheets, using lay terms and avoidance of medical jargon, may be helpful if given to patients along with a prescription.

Medication adverse effects actually may be used to the physician's advantage, in order to improve adherence. When prescribing a potentially irritating medication, the physician may warn the patient that the medication might burn or sting when applied, and let the patient know that "these symptoms are often a sign that the medication is working," which is true because the symptoms are a sign the patient is using the medication. These forewarnings will decrease the likelihood that

## Adherence Pearls

- Recognize that poor compliance is ubiquitous.
- Develop trust and a solid physician-patient relationship.
- Educate patients on their disease and the rationale for treatment.
- Discuss treatment options and involve patients in the development of a treatment plan.
- Simplify treatment regimens whenever possible.
- Inform patients of the risks of treatment, and reassure patients about potential side effects.
- Utilize follow-up visits to improve adherence and long-term outcomes.
- Consider the cost of treatment and help make treatment affordable for your patient.

patients will stop using the medication due to an unexpected side effect, and will also reduce callbacks or unscheduled office visits for adverse effects of the prescribed regimen.

Many topical medications prescribed by dermatologists have a negative connotation or are misunderstood by the patient. A key example is topical corticosteroids. Patients may be concerned about the safety of applying a “steroid” to their skin, or may believe the treatment could worsen their condition. It may be helpful to explain to patients that steroids are naturally produced by our bodies every day, so the application of topical steroids is not introducing anything foreign into the system. Patients perceive that “all natural” substances are safe and cannot be harmful. Referencing the “natural” origin of some treatments commonly prescribed in dermatology, such as vitamin D analogs for psoriasis, may alleviate patient concern and improve adherence. In the case of rosacea, using the sub-antimicrobial dose of doxycycline that does not cause resistance may have similar appeal to patients.

## 7. The Office Visit is a Powerful Motivator

Just as people floss more frequently before a dentist appointment or practice piano just before a lesson, patients tend to use their medications better around the time of an office visit. This concept is noted in the patient who explains to the physician that his or her skin condition is improved at the time of the office visit: “Doc, it’s so frustrating. You always catch it on a good day!” The phenomenon of improved medication use around the time of office visits is known as “white coat compliance” and can be used as a powerful motivator of patient behavior.

Patients who are diagnosed with a chronic inflammatory condition such as rosacea may be overwhelmed by the necessity of lifelong, daily treatment. A follow-up office visit scheduled shortly after treatment is instituted may improve

adherence by shortening the perceived time horizon — the patient need not use the treatment for the rest of his or her life, but just for a week until the next office visit. When the patient’s symptoms are improved by early adherence to the treatment regimen, he or she is more likely to continue using the medication over the long term. Although frequent office visits are not practical or cost-effective, a strategically scheduled visit shortly after prescribing a new treatment will create a positive feedback loop that will encourage the patient to fill the prescription, to establish a pattern of good use, and therefore to be faithful to the prescribed regimen over the longer term, which will improve long-term disease outcomes.

## 8. Consider the Cost of Treatment

Rising healthcare costs in the United States have placed a large financial burden on some patients. Prescription medication co-payments may be expensive, and patients may be unwilling to pay for a medication that they perceive as ineffective. This barrier is particularly important for topical medications, which are the mainstay of treatment for many dermatologic diseases. For diseases with limited areas of involvement such as rosacea, encouraging the patient that “a little goes a long way” and that a medication tube may last for several months, may put the cost into perspective. If several treatment options at different price points are available, involving the patient in the decision will improve the likelihood that the patient will actually fill the prescription and use the medication. Most importantly, prescribing effective treatments that control the patient’s symptoms will assure optimal medication adherence.

For those patients who cannot afford to pay for their medications, a number of discount programs are available and should be suggested to patients. Many pharmaceutical companies offer coupons for discounted co-payments, which may be delivered to the physician’s office by a pharmaceutical representative, or can also be found on the company’s Web site. Other resources may be available from non-profit organizations for dermatologic diseases. Having a dedicated staff member, such as a patient advocate who is well versed in the availability of need-based programs, is beneficial to ensuring optimal outcomes for your patients. ■



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