

Early Refills

Howard C. Anderson, Jr., R.Ph. – Executive Director – ND State Board of Pharmacy
Justin Stubstad, PharmD – Legal Intern – ND State Board of Pharmacy

Prescribers have recently expressed concerns that prescriptions for certain controlled substances are being refilled earlier than they should be. This is causing concern both because their treatment goals for those patients are not being met, and because this can often present a risk to the patient's health.

In two cases brought to our attention, prescriptions were written for 60 Hydrocodone/Acetaminophen 10/650 mg, ½-1 tablet by mouth every 4-6 hours. At this dosage, the patient should have been taking a maximum of six tablets daily for a minimum ten day supply. In both cases, these prescriptions were consistently refilled anywhere from three to five days early. Refilling this prescription after seven days three times would result in a patient receiving a 30-day supply of medication in 21 days. Besides the obvious risk of diversion and abuse, that patient would be taking 5.57 grams of acetaminophen daily for 21 days if they were to use the entire prescription.

In a more extreme example, prescriptions for 200 Hydrocodone/Acetaminophen 10/325, 1 tablet by mouth every 6 hours and 200 Hydrocodone/Ibuprofen, 1 tablet by mouth every 6 hours, were both written for 50-day supplies with three refills. However, these prescriptions were refilled many times after less than 15 days.

In these situations, it is important to consider the prescriber's treatment goals before refilling these prescriptions. Because of their potential for abuse as well as the health risk they can present to patients, controlled substances need to be monitored closely when refilling. If a patient is requesting an early refill, it is important to look at the reason for their request and in many cases to contact the prescriber to get their consent for the early refill.

Often, the prescriber will include on the prescription note on the dosage (e.g. "Max 6 per day," or "Not to exceed 4 tablets daily," or "No early refills"). In these cases, you must follow the letter of the prescription; early refills are not allowed.

It is very important that, as pharmacists, we work with prescribers to ensure the optimum patient outcome. Because controlled substances carry a high potential for abuse and adverse events, it is imperative that healthcare professionals work together to better treat our patients.