

Medical Abbreviations and Acronyms

- the medication name
- the dose
- the form
- the route of administration
- the frequency of use
- any additional information

What do all those ABCs, XYZs and letters in between mean?

(Or, reading and understanding prescriptions, diagnoses and medical reports)

MAE, SOB, ARF doesn't mean Mae is a mean and nasty dog, nor are these three abbreviations all approved medical or readily understandable abbreviations.

I really struggled over the 'MAE' that I found on a client's old care plan. After many hours of contemplation I finally realized that the nurse who did the assessment was indicating that the client "moves all extremities," which was good to know, but it did not tell me if the movement was functional, spastic, weak or assisted nor is 'MAE' on any list of approved medical abbreviations that I have found.

When using abbreviations be sure to use generally approved and readily understandable abbreviations or don't use them, write what you mean.

SOB is an approved medical abbreviation indicating "short of breath," but you need to be very careful who sees the abbreviation and in what context you use it or your client and/or friends and family of your client might see it and give it the other socially approved definition. It may be better to write it out rather than to offend.

ARF when found on a list of diagnoses means "acute renal failure." However, non medically trained personnel are not likely to readily identify this acronym. Once again, better to spell it out rather than be misunderstood.

Needless to say, we all need to be very careful of the abbreviations and acronyms we use, where we use them and that they are accurate and useful when we use them.

Deciphering that prescription order

It is important to know how to read a prescription since even pharmacists are human and errors are not unheard of. It is best to know how to read one to make sure your are getting and giving what was ordered. A medication prescription should include:

The medication name

While not many medications are indicated on a prescription using initials or abbreviations there are a few. If you do not understand completely what the medication is and it can not be found in a current medication book, call the physician or a pharmacist to clarify the medication.

A few of the medications that are frequently abbreviated are:

- MVI (multivitamin)
- FESO₄ (ferrous sulfate or iron)
- KCl (potassium chloride)
- HCTZ (hydrochlorothiazide)
- Ca (calcium)
- ASA (acetylsalicylic acid or aspirin)
- DHEA (Dehydroepiandrosterone)
- NaCl (sodium chloride)
- Ntg (nitroglycerine)
- NS (normal saline)
- MSO₄ (morphine sulfate).

There are others, be sure you know what they are and when filling out your medication sheets spell them out when possible.

The dose

The dose will be indicated in mg (milligram), gm (gram), ml (milliliter), cc (cubic centimeter), mcg or µg (microgram), mEq (milliequivalent), U (unit), IU (international unit), mg per ml (as in 5mg/1ml) or percent of solution as in eye drops and ointments.

Many of these doses contain zeros. It is very important to include zeros and decimal points so as to indicate the dosing in its most accurate form. Only use a zero before a decimal point as in 0.5mg (i.e., 1/2 mg) or within a number (i.e., 0.05mg). Do not use a zero before a whole number (05mg) or to end a number (.50mg). *The use of unnecessary zeros can be confusing and cause errors in dosing.*

Also, it is not wise to use µg for microgram which is easily confused with mg. It is preferable to use mcg or the decimal system to indicate the dose in mg (milligrams), a microgram (mcg or µg) is 1/1000 of a mg = 1 mcg = 1µg = 0.001 mg. Or, 1 milligram = 1,000mcg and 1 gram = 1,000 milligram.