

Dangerous Dosages and Suggested Alternatives

Abbreviation/ Dose Expression	Intended Meaning	Misinterpretation	Correction
Apothecary symbols	dram, minim	Misunderstood or misread (symbol for dram misread for “3” and minim misread as “mL”).	Use the metric system.
AU	aurio uterque (each ear)	Mistaken for OU (oculo uterque — each eye).	Don't use this abbreviation.
D/C	discharge, discontinue	Premature discontinuation of medications when D/C (intended to mean “discharge”) has been misinterpreted as “discontinued” when followed by a list of drugs.	Use “discharge” and “discontinue.”
DRUG NAMES			Use the complete spelling for drug names.
ARA-A	vidarabine	cytarabine (ARA-C)	
AZT	zidovudine (RETROVIR)	azathioprine	
CPZ	COMPAZINE (prochlorperazine)	chlorpromazine	
DPT	DEMEROL-PHENERGAN-THORAZINE	diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus (vaccine)	
HCl	hydrochloric acid	potassium chloride (the “H” is misinterpreted as “K”)	
HCT	hydrocortisone	hydrochlorothiazide	
HCTZ	hydrochlorothiazide	hydrocortisone (seen as HCT250 mg)	
MgSO ₄	magnesium sulfate	morphine sulfate	
MSO ₄	morphine sulfate	magnesium sulfate	
MTX	methotrexate	mitoxantrone	
TAC	triamcinolone	tetracaine, ADRENALIN, cocaine	
ZnSO ₄	zinc sulfate	morphine sulfate	
STEMMED NAMES			
“Nitro” drip	nitroglycerin infusion	sodium nitroprusside infusion	
“Norflox”	norfloxacin	NORFLEX (orphenadrine)	
µg	microgram	Mistaken for “mg” when handwritten.	Use “mcg.”
o.d. or OD	once daily	Misinterpreted as “right eye” (OD-oculus dexter) and administration of oral medications in the eye.	Use “daily.”
TIW or tiw	three times a week.	Mistaken as “three times a day.”	Don't use this abbreviation.
per os	orally	The “os” can be mistaken for “left eye.”	Use “PO,” “by mouth,” or “orally.”
q.d. or QD	every day	Mistaken as q.i.d., especially if the period after the “q” or the tail of the “q” is misunderstood as an “i.”	Use “daily” or “every day.”
Qn	nightly or at bedtime	Misinterpreted as “qh” (every hour).	Use “nightly.”
Qhs	nightly at bedtime	Misread as every hour.	Use “nightly.”
q6PM, etc.	every evening at 6 PM	Misread as every six hours.	Use 6 PM “nightly.”
q.o.d. or QOD	every other day	Misinterpreted as “q.d.” (daily) or “q.i.d.” (four times daily) if the “o” is poorly written.	Use “every other day.”

Abbreviation/ Dose Expression	Intended Meaning	Misinterpretation	Correction
sub q	subcutaneous	The "q" has been mistaken for "every" (e.g., one heparin dose ordered "sub q 2 hours before surgery" misunderstood as every 2 hours before surgery).	Use "subcut." or write "subcutaneous."
SC	subcutaneous	Mistaken for SL (sublingual).	Use "subcut." or write "subcutaneous."
U or u	unit	Read as a zero (0) or a four (4), causing a 10-fold overdose or greater (4U seen as "40" or 4u seen as 44").	"Unit" has no acceptable abbreviation. Use "unit."
IU	international unit	Misread as IV (intravenous).	Use "units."
cc	cubic centimeters	Misread as "U" (units).	Use "mL."
x3d	for three days	Mistaken for "three doses."	Use "for three days."
BT	bedtime	Mistaken as "BID" (twice daily).	Use "hs."
ss	sliding scale (insulin) or ½ (apothecary)	Mistaken for "55."	Spell out "sliding scale." Use "one-half" or use "½."
> and <	greater than and less than	Mistakenly used opposite of intended.	Use "greater than" or "less than."
/ (slash mark)	separates two doses or indicates "per"	Misunderstood as the number 1 ("25 units/10 units" read as "110" units).	Do not use a slash mark to separate doses. Use "per."
Name letters and dose numbers run together (e.g., Inderal40 mg)	Inderal 40 mg	Misread as Inderal 140 mg.	Always use space between drug name, dose and unit of measure.
Zero after decimal point (1.0)	1 mg	Misread as 10 mg if the decimal point is not seen.	Do not use terminal zeros for doses expressed in whole numbers.
No zero before decimal dose (.5 mg)	0.5 mg	Misread as 5 mg.	Always use zero before a decimal when the dose is less than a whole unit.

Source: Institute for Safe Medication Practices, Huntingdon Valley, PA.