

Do Not Use

Dangerous Abbreviations, Symbols and Dose Designations

The abbreviations, symbols, and dose designations found in this table have been reported as being frequently misinterpreted and involved in harmful medication errors. They should NEVER be used when communicating medication information.

Abbreviation	Intended Meaning	Problem	Correction
U	unit	Mistaken for “0” (zero), “4” (four), or cc.	Use “unit”.
IU	international unit	Mistaken for “IV” (intravenous) or “10” (ten).	Use “unit”.
Abbreviations for drug names		Misinterpreted because of similar abbreviations for multiple drugs; e.g., MS, MSO ₄ (morphine sulphate), MgSO ₄ (magnesium sulphate) may be confused for one another.	Do not abbreviate drug names.
QD QOD	Every day Every other day	QD and QOD have been mistaken for each other, or as ‘qid’. The Q has also been misinterpreted as “2” (two).	Use “daily” and “every other day”.
OD	Every day	Mistaken for “right eye” (OD = oculus dexter).	Use “daily”.
OS, OD, OU	Left eye, right eye, both eyes	May be confused with one another.	Use “left eye”, “right eye” or “both eyes”.
D/C	Discharge	Interpreted as “discontinue whatever medications follow” (typically discharge medications).	Use “discharge”.
cc	cubic centimetre	Mistaken for “u” (units).	Use “mL” or “millilitre”.
µg	microgram	Mistaken for “mg” (milligram) resulting in one thousand-fold overdose.	Use “mcg”.
Symbol	Intended Meaning	Potential Problem	Correction
@	at	Mistaken for “2” (two) or “5” (five).	Use “at”.
> <	Greater than Less than	Mistaken for “7” (seven) or the letter “L”. Confused with each other.	Use “greater than”/“more than” or “less than”/“lower than”.
Dose Designation	Intended Meaning	Potential Problem	Correction
Trailing zero	1.0 mg	Decimal point is overlooked resulting in 10-fold dose error.	Never use a zero by itself after a decimal point. Use “1 mg”.
Lack of leading zero	. 1 mg	Decimal point is overlooked resulting in 10-fold dose error.	Always use a zero before a decimal point. Use “0.1 mg”.

Adapted from ISMP’s List of Error-Prone Abbreviations, Symbols, and Dose Designations 2006

Report actual and potential medication errors to ISMP Canada at https://www.ismp-canada.org/err_report.htm or by calling 1-866-54-ISMP.



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