

Pharmacy Abbreviations and Sig Codes (159)

The abbreviations and sig codes the PTCB tests, grouped by type, with meanings and safety notes.

Source: ptcbquizprep.com. Grounded in the ISMP error-prone abbreviations list. Last reviewed July 15, 2026.

Time & Frequency

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
ad lib	freely, as much or as often as the patient wants	From Latin ad libitum; used when the order sets no fixed limit.
ATC	around the clock	Doses are given at set intervals through the full 24 hours, day and night.
bid	twice a day	From bis in die; the two doses are usually spaced about 12 hours apart.
tid	three times a day	From ter in die; commonly spaced roughly every 8 hours during waking hours.
qid	four times a day	From quater in die; do not confuse with qd (daily) or qod (every other day).
q	every	Placed before a number and time unit, as in q8h meaning every 8 hours.
qh	every hour	From quaque hora; a number can be added, so q1h means every 1 hour.
q1h	every 1 hour	The number can be swapped, so q3h means every 3 hours.
q2h	every 2 hours	
q4h	every 4 hours	
q6h	every 6 hours	
q8h	every 8 hours	
q12h	every 12 hours	
ac	before meals	From ante cibum; the dose is taken shortly before eating.
pc	after meals	From post cibum; often used to lessen stomach upset by dosing after food.
hs	at bedtime	From hora somni; ISMP advises writing 'bedtime' because hs is also read as half-strength.
qhs	every night at bedtime	Error-prone; can be misread as qhr (every hour), so spell out 'nightly'.
prn	as needed	From pro re nata; a good order also states the reason and a minimum interval, as in prn pain q6h.
stat	immediately, right now	From statim; signals a single urgent dose to be given without delay.
qam	every morning	Also written qAM; means one dose each morning.
qpm	every evening	Also written qPM; means one dose each evening.
ud	as directed	From ut dictum; ISMP flags it because it can be misread as 'unit dose', so spell out 'as directed'.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
noct	at night	From nocte.
am	morning, before noon	From ante meridiem.
pm	afternoon or evening	From post meridiem.
tiw	three times a week	Error-prone; easily confused with three times a day, so write '3 times weekly'.
qwk	once a week	
sos	one dose if needed	From si opus sit; a single dose given only if the situation requires it.
alt h	every other hour	From alternis horis.
tds	three times a day	From ter die sumendum; a UK-style order equal to tid.
qds	four times a day	From quater die sumendus; a UK-style order equal to qid.
x	for (a stated duration)	As in 'x 10 d' meaning for 10 days; avoid the run-together form x3d, which reads as 3 doses.

Route & Dosage Form

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
PO	by mouth, orally	From per os; PO or 'by mouth' is preferred because the 'os' alone can be misread as 'left eye'.
SL	under the tongue (sublingual)	The tablet dissolves under the tongue and is absorbed there rather than swallowed.
buccal	between the cheek and gum	Sometimes shortened to BUC; the dose dissolves against the inside of the cheek.
PR	rectally, by rectum	Used for suppositories, enemas, and rectal solutions.
PV	vaginally	From per vagina; also written 'vag'. Used for vaginal tablets, creams, and rings.
IM	into a muscle (intramuscular)	
IV	into a vein (intravenous)	
IVP	intravenous push	The dose is injected into the vein over a short, controlled time.
IVPB	intravenous piggyback	A small IV bag infused through a port on an existing IV line.
subcut	under the skin (subcutaneous)	ISMP prefers 'subcut'; the older forms SQ and SC are error-prone and discouraged.
ID	into the skin (intradermal)	A shallow injection; can be misread as IV or IM, so 'intradermal' is safer.
IN	into the nose (intranasal)	IN can be misread as IM or IV, so write 'intranasal' or NAS.
top	applied to the skin surface (topical)	
TD	through the skin over time (transdermal)	Describes patches that release drug slowly, as with a transdermal patch.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
INH	inhaled, breathed into the lungs	Refers to the inhaled route; do not confuse with isoniazid, a drug also abbreviated INH.
neb	given by nebulizer	Liquid medicine is turned into a fine mist and breathed in.
AD	right ear	From auris dextra; ISMP flags ear codes because AD, AS, and AU are confused with the eye codes OD, OS, and OU.
AS	left ear	From auris sinistra; spelling out 'left ear' avoids ear and eye mix-ups.
AU	each ear, both ears	From auris utraque.
OD	right eye	From oculus dexter; OD is also misread as 'once daily', so many prescribers spell out 'right eye'.
OS	left eye	From oculus sinister.
OU	each eye, both eyes	From oculus uterque.
NG	through a nasogastric tube	A tube passed from the nose to the stomach used to give medicine or feeding.
tab	tablet	
cap	capsule	
susp	suspension	A liquid holding solid particles that settle, so it must be shaken before each dose.
sol	solution	Also written soln; a clear liquid with the drug fully dissolved.
elix	elixir	A sweet, flavored liquid that usually contains some alcohol.
syr	syrup	A thick, sugary liquid base for oral medicines.
supp	suppository	A solid dose that melts after insertion into the rectum, vagina, or urethra.
ung	ointment	From unguentum; a greasy, oil-based semisolid.
cr	cream	Also written crm; a water-based semisolid that rubs in more easily than an ointment.
lot	lotion	A thin, pourable liquid for spreading over the skin.
gtt	drop (gtts means drops)	From gutta; used for eye, ear, and nose liquids.
troche	lozenge (troche)	A solid piece that dissolves slowly in the mouth.
EC	enteric-coated	A coating that lets the tablet pass the stomach and dissolve in the intestine; do not crush.
DR	delayed-release	Releases the drug later than a plain form, often past the stomach.
ER	extended-release	Releases the drug slowly over time; usually do not crush or chew.
XR	extended-release	Same idea as ER; appears in brand names to signal slow release.
XL	extended-release	Another slow-release label; do not crush.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
SR	sustained-release	Releases the drug gradually to keep blood levels steadier.
CR	controlled-release	Designed to release the drug at a set, steady rate.
IR	immediate-release	Releases the full dose right away, unlike ER, SR, or CR forms.
inj	injection	
MDI	metered-dose inhaler	A pressurized inhaler that delivers one measured puff per actuation.
pulv	powder	From pulvis; a dry form that may be mixed or reconstituted before use.

Measurement & Quantity

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
mg	milligram	One thousandth of a gram; the most common strength unit on labels.
mcg	microgram	One thousandth of a milligram; use 'mcg', never the symbol that reads as mg.
g	gram	Sometimes written 'gm', but plain 'g' is the preferred abbreviation.
kg	kilogram	Equal to 1,000 grams; used for weight-based dosing calculations.
mL	milliliter	One thousandth of a liter; about 5 mL equals one teaspoonful.
L	liter	
cc	cubic centimeter	Equal to 1 mL, but ISMP flags 'cc' because it is misread as 'u' (units); use mL.
gr	grain	An old apothecary unit of about 65 mg; easily confused with 'g' for gram, so use metric units.
tsp	teaspoonful	About 5 mL; patients should measure with a dosing syringe or cup, not a kitchen spoon.
tbsp	tablespoonful	About 15 mL, equal to three teaspoonfuls.
oz	ounce	A fluid ounce is about 30 mL.
lb	pound	About 0.45 kg; weight is often converted to kilograms for dosing.
mEq	milliequivalent	A unit of chemical activity used for electrolytes such as potassium.
mmol	millimole	A unit of amount used for some electrolytes and laboratory values.
IU	international unit	A standardized activity unit for vitamins and biologics; write it out because IU is error-prone.
qs	a sufficient quantity	From quantum satis; add enough of an ingredient to reach the target amount.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
qs ad	add enough to make up to	Add the base until the total volume or weight stated in the order is reached.
aa	of each	From ana; use the same amount of each listed ingredient.
BSA	body surface area	Calculated from height and weight; used to dose many chemotherapy drugs.
dil	dilute	An instruction to thin a preparation with a stated liquid.
#	number, or dispense this many	The # sign before a number shows the quantity to dispense, as in #30.
dr	dram	An old apothecary unit of about 5 mL; its symbol is misread as the number 3, so use metric units.
ss	one-half (apothecary)	Error-prone; can be mistaken for '55', so write 'one-half' or use the fraction.

Common Drug & Term Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
APAP	acetaminophen	From N-acetyl-para-aminophenol; ISMP recommends spelling out 'acetaminophen' since APAP is not widely recognized.
ASA	aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid)	
HCTZ	hydrochlorothiazide	A thiazide water pill; can be confused with hydrocortisone (HCT), so the full name is safer.
KCl	potassium chloride	A potassium supplement; written as a salt to keep the meaning clear.
NTG	nitroglycerin	Used for chest pain; spelling out the full name avoids mix-ups with other drips.
MOM	milk of magnesia	A magnesium-based antacid and laxative.
NS	normal saline (0.9% sodium chloride)	
D5W	dextrose 5% in water	A common IV sugar solution.
LR	lactated Ringer's	An IV fluid that supplies several electrolytes.
TPN	total parenteral nutrition	Complete IV nutrition given when the gut cannot be used.
NSAID	nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug	Includes ibuprofen and naproxen.
SSRI	selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor	A class of antidepressants such as sertraline and fluoxetine.
SNRI	serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor	Antidepressants such as duloxetine and venlafaxine.
PPI	proton pump inhibitor	Lowers stomach acid; examples include omeprazole and pantoprazole.
ACEI	angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor	Blood pressure drugs whose generic names end in -pril.
ARB	angiotensin receptor blocker	Blood pressure drugs whose generic names end in -sartan.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
CCB	calcium channel blocker	Blood pressure and heart-rate drugs such as amlodipine and diltiazem.
BB	beta blocker	Heart and blood pressure drugs whose generic names end in -olol.
ABX	antibiotics	
HRT	hormone replacement therapy	
Rx	prescription, or 'take'	From the Latin recipe, meaning 'take'; marks a medication order.
OTC	over the counter	Medicines that can be bought without a prescription.
DAW	dispense as written	Tells the pharmacy to supply the exact product ordered and not substitute a generic.
NDC	National Drug Code	A unique number identifying a drug's maker, product, and package size.
Sig	directions for the patient	From signa; the part of the order that becomes the printed label instructions.
disp	dispense	Shows how much of the drug to give the patient.
dtd	give this many doses	From dentur tales doses; tells the pharmacist the number of doses to prepare.
NR	no refills	Also written non rep, from non repetatur.
NKDA	no known drug allergies	Also seen as NKA, meaning no known allergies of any kind.
MAR	medication administration record	The chart that documents each dose given to a patient.
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration	Issues the DEA number a prescriber needs to order controlled substances.
AWP	average wholesale price	A benchmark list price used in drug pricing and reimbursement.
c	with	From cum; traditionally written as a lowercase c with a line above it.
s	without	From sine; traditionally written as a lowercase s with a line above it.
BS	blood sugar (blood glucose)	Also written BG; a reading used to adjust diabetes medicines.

Error-Prone: Do Not Use

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
U or u	intended to mean 'unit'	On the Joint Commission Do Not Use list; a U is misread as 0, 4, or cc, causing large overdoses. Always write 'unit'.
IU	intended to mean 'international unit'	On the Do Not Use list; misread as IV or the number 10. Write 'international unit'.
QD or q.d.	intended to mean 'every day'	On the Do Not Use list; the period or tail of the q looks like an i, so it reads as qid. Write 'daily'.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Note
QOD or q.o.d.	intended to mean 'every other day'	On the Do Not Use list; misread as qd or qid. Write 'every other day'.
MS	intended to mean morphine sulfate	On the Do Not Use list; confused with magnesium sulfate. Write the full drug name.
MSO4	intended to mean morphine sulfate	On the Do Not Use list; misread as magnesium sulfate. Write 'morphine sulfate'.
MgSO4	intended to mean magnesium sulfate	On the Do Not Use list; misread as morphine sulfate. Write 'magnesium sulfate'.
Trailing zero (1.0 mg)	a whole-number dose written with a needless decimal and zero	On the Do Not Use list; if the decimal is missed, 1.0 mg reads as 10 mg. Write '1 mg'.
Naked decimal (.5 mg)	a dose below one written without a leading zero	On the Do Not Use list; .5 mg can be read as 5 mg. Always write '0.5 mg' with a leading zero.
cc	intended to mean cubic centimeter (milliliter)	A poorly written cc looks like 'u' (units); use 'mL' instead.
µg	intended to mean microgram	The micro symbol is misread as 'm', causing a 1,000-fold error; use 'mcg'.
SC or SQ	intended to mean subcutaneous	SC is misread as SL (sublingual) and SQ as '5 every'; use 'subcut'.
HS	intended to mean half-strength	Confused with hs meaning bedtime; spell out 'half-strength'.
TIW	intended to mean three times a week	Misread as three times a day or twice a week; write '3 times weekly'.
D/C	intended to mean discharge or discontinue	The two meanings are opposite; spell out 'discharge' or 'discontinue'.
@	intended to mean 'at'	Misread as the number 2; write the word 'at'.
> and <	intended to mean greater than and less than	The symbols are easily flipped or misread; write 'greater than' and 'less than'.
IJ	intended to mean injection	Misread as IV or intrajugular; write 'injection'.
o.d. or OD	intended to mean once daily	Also means right eye, so oral doses have been placed in the eye; write 'daily'.
per os	intended to mean by mouth	The 'os' is misread as 'left eye'; use 'PO' or 'by mouth'.
x3d	intended to mean for three days	The run-together form is misread as '3 doses'; write 'for 3 days'.
ss	intended to mean one-half or sliding scale	Misread as the number 55; write 'one-half' or spell out 'sliding scale'.
AD, AS, AU	intended to mean right ear, left ear, each ear	The ear codes are confused with the eye codes OD, OS, and OU; spell out the ear.

