

To avoid potentially life-threatening miscommunications, the Joint Commission developed a list of prohibited abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols for all handwritten, printed, or electronic patient-specific communications. This list is not limited to just medication orders.

Here is the minimum list of dangerous abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols that staff should never use, the common types of errors that can occur as a result of their use, and safe alternatives:

- Do not use “U” for unit because it can be mistaken as zero, four, or cc. Instead, write “unit.”
- Do not use “IU” (for international unit) because it can be mistaken as IV (intravenous) or 10. Instead, write “international unit.”
- Do not use “Q.D.” or “Q.O.D.” because these acronyms can be mistaken for each other, the period after the Q can be mistake for an “I,” and the “O” can be mistaken for an “I.” Instead, write “daily” or “every other day.”
- Do not use the trailing zero (for example, 1.0 mg) because the decimal point can be missed. Instead, omit the zero after the decimal point (for example, 1 mg). Conversely, do not omit the leading zero (for example, .1 mg). Instead, staff should always include the leading zero (for example, 0.1 mg).
- Do not use “MS,” MS04,” or “MgS04” as they can be confused with one another and can mean morphine sulfate or magnesium sulfate. Instead, write “morphine sulfate” or “magnesium sulfate.”

If you encounter any organization-prohibited abbreviation, acronym, or symbol, get written confirmation of the intended meaning before the order is carried out..