Three systems of measurement are used for medication doses: metric, household, and apothecary. The metric system is the main system now used for medication doses. Household measures are used for some medications taken at home, primarily liquids. The apothecary system has been almost completely phased out of use. Nurses need to know the metric-household equivalents for home care practice and family teaching. They also need to distinguish the metric and apothecary systems in case a prescriber writes an order in the apothecary system.

The U.S. Metric Association, Inc. was founded in 1916 to advocate U.S. conversion to the French International System of Units (SI), now known as the Modern Metric System. Resistance to change shared by many since Napoleonic times has slowed the U.S. “metrication” progress. In fact, there are anti-metric system associations.

Membership in the European Union requires the use of the metric system. Medicines are now almost entirely ordered and supplied in the metric system. If you would rather count by tens, hundreds, and thousands, then this is the system for you. Because the metric system is a standardized decimal measurement system using multiples (powers) of 10, it is precise and easy to work with. Memorization of