The Halachos of Yom Kippur

Melacha: All forms of work that are forbidden on a regular Shabbos (Melachos), are forbidden on Yom Kippur as well. In addition we are careful not to make any preparations during Yom Kippur for the meal after the fast, even if these preparations do not involve Melacha. We do not set coffeepots and the like on Erev Yom Kippur to be ready after the fast.

Candlelighting: As Melacha is forbidden on Yom Kippur, the procedure for candlelighting is as on Shabbos, i.e. we light before reciting the Bracha.
Common custom is to light candles at home, with the home prepared as for Shabbos, with clean tablecloths and the like. It is ideal to recite the Bracha on these candles. In addition to these candles, it is customary to light a 24-hour candle for the man of the house, as well as a Yizkor candle if one has lost their father and/or mother. One Yizkor candle for each set of parents is sufficient. These 24-hour candles should be used to light the Havdala candle on Motzei Yom Kippur.
Many are accustomed to light candles in shul. This may be done in addition to the candles lit at home, as there is some question regarding the recitation of a Bracha over the candles lit at shul. It should be noted however that many have the long-standing custom of lighting their Yom Tov candles in shul, with the Bracha.
If one lights candles at home and wishes to drive to shul afterwards, they must explicitly state that they do not with to accept Yom Tov with the lighting. In this situation, they should not recite the Shehecheyanu Bracha when lighting, but should say it with the congregation at Kol Nidrei.

Clothing: Married men are accustomed to wear a Kittel on Yom Kippur, while many women choose to wear white clothing. It is customary to reduce the usage of cosmetics and jewelry.

Fasting: It is of course forbidden to eat and drink on Yom Kippur. This prohibition limits us from even small amounts of food or drink. We are likewise not permitted to wash out our mouths on Yom Kippur.

Medical Concerns: Those who may not be able to fast for health reasons, must consult with both their rabbi and their doctor as to how to proceed. One may not fast if it could create a medical danger to their life, or if it compromises their ability to fight a dangerous medical condition they are experiencing. Even in such situations, however, there may be times when some level of fasting can be maintained. The details of these Halachos are quite complex, both in terms of how and when they should be applied. As such it is very important to discuss these issues with both your rabbi and your doctor.
Someone who feels like they are fainting or a similarly observable dramatic weakness, should break the fast.
Pregnant and nursing mothers generally fast on Yom Kippur, however if there is any special condition that warrants concern in either case, a rabbi should be consulted. A pregnant woman who begins to feel labor-like symptoms should drink immediately.
Pills: Individuals taking medications must consult their rabbi and doctor as to how to proceed on Yom Kippur. It is extremely important that one not decide on their own to discontinue for the day the usage of critical therapies such as heart, blood pressure, diabetic, or psychiatric medications.

It is very important to note that the swallowing of a pill in and of itself is often permitted on Yom Kippur even for someone who is not dangerously ill, but is feeling very poorly (e.g. – debilitating headache). This is true specifically of swallowed pills, not of chewables or of elixirs and syrups, and only when the pill is being swallowed alone, without the help of water to wash it down.

If the patient needs to wash it down, then it is proper to wash it down with a bitter liquid, such that is not normally drunk as a beverage. For instance, a person may choose to wash the pill down with tonic water mixed with regular water, or they may dissolve the pill slightly in the water, rendering the water bitter before using it to swallow the rest of the pill. One who is dangerously ill who finds these suggestions impossible, may swallow the pill with water as usual.

It is important to note that certain medications require the patient to be properly hydrated, or otherwise risk toxicity or other dangers. Patients taking blood pressure medications must be especially conscious of hydration concerns. These should be discussed with the doctor and rabbi before Yom Kippur.

Washing: Washing is generally forbidden on Yom Kippur, unless the washing is necessary for basic cleanliness, to remove actual dirt. The custom is to be quite strict regarding this prohibition. Ritual washing, such as when we awaken in the morning or emerge from the bathroom, is limited to the fingers only, not the usual washing of the entire hand. The only exception to this is for the Kohanim before Bircas Kohanim, who wash the entire hand as usual.

Anointing: This prohibition is understood to include the application of any oils, sprays or powders on Yom Kippur, including perfumes and deodorants. Indeed anointing is even more limited than washing in that while it may be done to address an actual ailment, it is not permitted for the sake of cleanliness. Note as well that even when being done for health reasons, it is only permitted when the use of such a treatment is permitted on Shabbos, violating neither the prohibition regarding the smearing of ointments, nor the general prohibition against taking medicine on Shabbos for minor ailments.

Shoes: It is forbidden to wear shoes or slippers with any leather content on Yom Kippur.

Intimacy: As marital intimacy is forbidden on Yom Kippur, a husband and wife must interact using all of the limitations and safeguards applied during the period of niddah. In addition, it is appropriate to keep some kind of a night light on in the master bedroom.

Children & Yom Kippur: Very young children have no limitations of the fast, however they should not wear leather shoes. As children grow older, especially as they reach the ages of 9 or 10, they should be encouraged to delay breakfast, joining somewhat in the fast. A child of 11 should already be preparing for adulthood by fasting a meaningful part of the day, at least until noon. It is customary that boys try to complete the three fast days preceding their Bar Mitzvah. Girls should also attempt to complete at least one fast before they become Bat Mitzvah.

We wish you all a meaningful fast and a Gmar Chasima Tova!