

Ask the Experts...

Why Some Seniors Need Guidance When Taking Their Medication

A recent study shows that 38 million seniors suffer drug complications every year, about 180,000 which are life-threatening. Diagnosing a medication overdose can be complicated as well, as often the harmful effects of taking too much medication or the wrong medication is diagnosed as something else, like a stroke or dementia.

Part of the problem involves those myths that have sprung up over the use of medication. For example:

- If one dose makes me feel good, a larger dose will make me feel even better.
- If one drug does not work, I should take two or three.
- If I can buy it over the counter, it must be safe.
- If my physician has not stopped the medication, I can still use it.
- If it helped my friend, it will help me.

The fact that seniors are most prone to medication problems is not surprising when you consider that 77 percent of those between 65 and 79 suffer from one or more chronic diseases, as do 85% of those over 80. As a result, the average senior ages 65 - 69 fills 13.6 prescriptions per year and those 80 - 84 have 18.2 prescriptions filled annually. In addition, many see multiple physicians for their various ailments.

Combine this with the physiological changes of aging, which alter the way the body processes and reacts to certain medications, and you can see the potential for disaster. As an example, the liver and kidneys do not metabolize medications as easily, and changes in the distribution of fat and muscle can make seniors more susceptible to adverse drug events.

Further compounding this problem is the economics part of this equation: many seniors do not take the medications they need because they cannot afford them (since they spend nearly four times as much on prescription medications as those under age 65). The biggest medication problems involve:

Not taking medicine correctly – either forgetting to take it or failing to follow instructions.

- Allergic reactions
- Drug side effects
- Drug interactions
- Duplication
- Wrong dosage
- Unnecessary or inappropriate usage

Some of the more common drug-to-drug interactions include taking aspirin with a blood thinner, like Coumadin, or certain diabetic medications; using antacids with heart and blood pressure medications; and combining antihistamines with antidepressants. There can also be adverse reactions when taking certain medications with such common foods as dairy products, caffeine, fruit juices, and alcohol, or with herbal supplements like ginkgo biloba or kava kava.

The potential for drug medication problems has only increased with the advent of the Internet and the opportunity for consumers to purchase medication and supplements online. Consumers should stay away from purchasing medications that are not FDA-approved (i.e. vitamins and supplements), avoid sites that do not require a written prescription, and resist claims of “new cures” or “amazing results.”

Medication Management

By following certain protocols, seniors and their family caregivers can manage their use of medication more effectively. Here are some recommendations:

- Throw out any expired or discontinued prescription medications.
- Only use medications that have been prescribed for you.
- Drink a full glass of water and do not lie down for 30 minutes after taking medication.
- Fill all prescriptions at the same pharmacy.

- Check the label when you get a prescription to verify that you're receiving the proper medication. If possible, read back the prescription to your pharmacist or health care provider.
- Read the patient information sheet that accompanies the medication. If you do not receive an information sheet, request it from your pharmacist.
- When possible, keep medications in their original containers to avoid confusion.
- Know what to do if you miss a dose -- contact your health care provider or pharmacist with any questions.
- Notify your pharmacist should there be a change in the color, size, shape, or smell of your medication when it is refilled.
- Do not take another person's medications.
- Do not take any over-the-counter drugs without first consulting your physician or pharmacist.
- Look for single ingredient products.
- Immediately contact your primary care provider or pharmacy if you notice any problems with taking your medicines.
- Tell your health care provider if you are taking any dietary supplements or over-the-counter medications.
- Prepare a list of all medications you are taking including herbal and over the counter. The list should be updated monthly, with copies kept at home and shared with family members and friends. Take it with you to doctor appointments, hospital stays, or emergency room visits.

Using multiple medications -- the rule rather than the exception for most seniors -- can be a tricky proposition. By taking the necessary precautions, however, you can greatly reduce the likelihood of potentially serious consequences