

Polypharmacy in Older Adults

Information for Patients/Caregivers



What is Polypharmacy?

The term polypharmacy refers to the use of multiple medications, typically five or more medicines or more than twelve doses a day prescribed by doctors. Polypharmacy can cause increased side effects of one or more medicines, adverse drug reactions and interactions, inability to take medicines as advised, increased risk of confusion, poor balance and falls, and hospitalization.¹

Why Are the Elderly at Risk for Polypharmacy and Adverse Drug Reactions?

As people age, they develop more long-term illnesses, for which multiple medicines may be prescribed.² At times, multiple doctors looking after various illnesses prescribe drugs that can interfere with medicines given by another doctor. Thus, this increases the risk of adverse drug reactions.³

Age-Related Changes:

With advancing age, the progressive functional decline in organ systems (e.g., kidney, liver) leads to changes in the way medications behave and stay in the body.⁴ Therefore, the more medications are taken, the higher the likelihood of serious adverse effects that would require medical attention.⁵

How Can You Address Polypharmacy?

- Talk to your family physicians and try not to change doctors frequently.
- Be consistent with one pharmacy and talk to your pharmacist before changing any medications.
- Understand the reason for taking a medicine and make sure that you know the names of all your medicines, including the dose and frequency.
- When medicines are hard to remember, it is useful to write them down on a piece of paper. You or your family can refer to it when needed and share it with your doctor again.
- Update the medicines list whenever a change is made.
- Talk to your healthcare professionals about deprescribing.

What is Deprescribing?

When too many medications are taken, deprescribing is a solution. Deprescribing means reducing or stopping medications that may not be beneficial or may cause harm.⁶

The goal of deprescribing is to maintain or improve the quality of life.

Start a conversation with your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse. Here are some questions you should be asking:


- 1) Why am I taking this medication?
- 2) What are the potential benefits and disadvantages of this medicine?
- 3) Can this medicine affect my memory or cause me to collapse?
- 4) Can I stop or reduce the dose of this medication (i.e., deprescribing)?

References:

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