

Aging Considerations: Effects of Medication

Many older people are not aware of the age related changes that make their bodies more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol, drugs and medications. As we age, our bodies experience changes (i.e. enzymatic, metabolic and physical) that impact the absorption, processing and excretion of medications. Some drugs may actually have the opposite effect in an older body than they do in a younger body. Unfortunately, most drug testing is done on younger people and dosage recommendations are often based on the effects measured in younger bodies.

Over 75% of people over the age of 65 take a prescription medication. The average number of medications an older adult may be using at any given time is five. More than half of these prescriptions have some sedating side effects. The cost of medications and other barriers to medication access may result in people skipping doses, sharing medications or altering a prescription. This can be very dangerous and it can worsen illnesses. If you cannot take a medication as prescribed, tell your health care professional and be honest about the reasons – there might be another way to meet your medication needs.

Older adults are the greatest consumers of over-the-counter (OTC) medications (antacids, cold remedies, laxatives, sleep aids, etc.) and “nutriceuticals” (herbal remedies, dietary supplements, vitamins, etc.) accounting for 30% of all OTC sales. A common myth is that they are “safe” because they are readily available and not subject to the same Federal Drug Administration (FDA) standards. In fact, OTC’s can have significant side effects and negative interactions with other drugs. Some can be habit forming and some can be dangerous to individuals with dementia and certain illnesses.

With both prescription and non-prescription medications and nutriceuticals, the side effects of one drug can be intensified by the effects of another. This is called “drug-drug interaction,” and older adults should learn the symptoms and effects of dangerous interactions. Talk to your doctors, pharmacists and other health care professionals.

Whatever the drug, dangerous substance misuse / abuse by older adults goes under-estimated, under-identified, under-diagnosed and under-treated. This happens for a multitude of reasons including limited research and data, confusion of symptoms with other problems, lack of education, ageism, myths, stigma and denial.

Anyone who has been on a long-term medication should have the medication and dosage reviewed. The types of medications or dosage strength of long-term medications may need to be changed with age and onset of other illnesses. When taking certain medications, it may be best to avoid alcohol. Alcohol is a drug with sedating side effects and properties that might alter medication effectiveness or cause negative drug / drug interactions.

Responsible medication use includes the following:

- Always inform the doctor of all prescription and non-prescription substances you take, including the amount of alcohol you drink
- Follow the directions on the label



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- Know what time of day, and how many times per day to take a medication
- Know if you should take the medication with or without food
- Ask if any of your medications might react with other prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, alcohol or foods
- Keep track of any side effects you experience and report these to your health care provider
- Review all medications with your health care provider every six to 12-months to evaluate their necessity, therapeutic effect and dose appropriateness

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