



Problems of Polypharmacy

(Excerpted from an article by Dr. William Umiker, Senior News)

Polypharmacy is simply a term used to describe any patient who is taking multiple types of prescribed or over-the-counter medications and supplements. In many instances, older patients are taking medications prescribed by various specialists or members of a multi-physician group without the knowledge of all involved parties, including their primary care physician. Unfortunately, many physicians fail to ask what medications these people are taking and as a result, serious complications can arise.

Every year, there are thousands of deaths due to side effects and drug incompatibilities. Often, the causes of these deaths go undetected and the more drugs people take, the greater risk of adverse reactions and complications. There are many symptoms which may be indicative of polypharmacy that has gotten out of control. Unless patients provide the information necessary for their physicians to advise them properly, or heed the cautions of the providing pharmacist, they are unlikely to be aware of all the compounding problems which can occur.

Frequently, patients interpret symptoms of drug incompatibility as manifestations of their underlying disease or illness, or an indication that the medications are not performing as specified. Thus, they may not only fail to alert their caregivers, but may increase or decrease the dosage of the medications they are taking without the approval or knowledge of their physicians.

The following precautions should help both patients and caregivers alike with managing the use of such medications:

1. Keep a detailed, up-to-date list of all drugs and supplements that your family member is taking.
2. Hold a periodic “brown-bag” review. Put all your drugs and supplements in a bag and ask your pharmacist and physician to review them. Start with your pharmacist and then take them to your physician at the next scheduled appointment. The review should focus on whether or not all the medications are still necessary and whether there are any negative side effects from being taken by themselves or in conjunction with other medications and supplements.
3. Inform your physician about any herbs or over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, etc. being taken.

4. When your doctor writes a new prescription, make sure you understand exactly why you are taking it, how soon you can expect it to be effective, what the possible side effects may be, and how long you can expect to take the medication.
5. Try to use the same pharmacy for all prescriptions whenever possible. Most pharmacies are now computerized and have a complete listing of all prescriptions they've filled for each patient. These databases can cross-reference drugs to look for any incompatibilities with drugs you are already on or alert you to adverse side effects which might be anticipated.
6. Carefully read all the product information inserts that come with the medication and discuss them with your pharmacist or physician if you have any concerns or questions.
7. If you notice any symptom you think may be related to the drug you are taking, notify your physician immediately.

For additional information about taking and controlling medications, contact Quest EAP at 1-800-364-6352 and ask for a referral to our Eldercare Specialist. This is a free and confidential service with no obligation.

