MEDICATION SAFETY
What’s Normal, What’s Not
Part 1 of a Series

Older adults often take a number of medications including prescription drugs, over the counter medications, vitamins, herbal supplements, personally concocted home remedies and more. Medications are typically used to help people achieve and maintain health, enhance wellness, and improve quality of life. While medications can provide tremendous benefits, they also pose safety risks. We offer the medication safety mini-series to help older adults, family members and professionals become more informed about medication safety.

Safety First

"Safety First" is more than just a nice slogan, it is a critical reminder that medication errors and interactions do happen every day. As we age, we are more susceptible to medication “mishaps” that can cause negative consequences. Medication errors are responsible for 122,000 hospital admissions for older adults in the U.S. yearly.

Due to potential safety risks keep “Safety First” in mind whenever:
- taking prescription medications
- using over-the-counter medications (with or without prescription medications)
- combining herbal remedies with prescription or over-the-counter medicines
- adding vitamins or other substances (e.g., alcohol).

Older adults are prone to higher rates of chronic illness and take more medications than other age groups. Did you know that the body systems slow down with age? As a result, it often takes medications and other substances longer to work and they stay in the body longer. These changes result in a higher potential for safety risks such as dangerous reactions (side effects), interactions, over-dose, poisoning and even death. In addition, with multiple health care practitioners prescribing medications the risk of complications is significant.

At the Center for Aging with Dignity at the University of Cincinnati College of Nursing, we realize that:
- Older adults frequently require multiple medications to treat an episode of acute illness such as infection or chronic illness such as heart disease.
As a result of natural age-related changes the body tends to process medications differently than younger people.

The use of multiple medications increases the potential for adverse events including drug-drug interactions, dangerous side effects, and perhaps, poisoning.

To gain better understanding of the seriousness of safety issues posed by the older adult-aging-medication connection, consider the following facts about the use of prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, herbal supplements and vitamin use by this population:

- 50.5 million (91%) of older adults use at least one medication regularly.
- 40% of older adults take five or more prescription drugs.
- 13% of the U.S. population takes 34% of all prescription meds and 30% of over-the-counter drugs.
- 30% of hospital admissions are related to drug related problems or toxic effects. 40% of older adults cannot read and interpret a prescription label.
- 67% of older adults do not understand information provided (e.g., inserts and information sheets that accompany meds) about their prescriptions.
- Nearly one half of older adults use one or more over-the-counter medications or dietary supplements.
- More than half of older adults use five or more prescription, over-the-counter medication or dietary supplement.

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References


The Center for Aging with Dignity offers the Medication Safety Series as a community service. We are devoted to keeping people "SAFE After 60" by advocating for and advancing best-practice programs on the safety and mistreatment of older people. (MS1-July ’11) Copyright © 2006-2011 Charles Puchta – University of Cincinnati. DISCLAIMER – This publication is designed to raise health awareness and is not intended to replace the advice of health care professionals.