

Feature Article

Older Adults -- Who Are Especially Susceptible to Medicine Use Related Problems -- MUST Take Time Out to Talk About Their Medications

National Education Campaign Launches to Improve Medicine Communication, Promote Safe and Appropriate Medicine Use

Medicines are essential therapeutic tools, used to treat or delay the onset or progression of many chronic conditions, including arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and cancer. For example, many Americans are prescribed medicine to control both high blood pressure and cholesterol levels in the hope of delaying or preventing the onset of heart disease. Medicines to manage arthritis, a leading cause of disability, work by reducing pain, swelling and stiffness.

Fortunately for America's aging baby boomer population—expected to swell to 71 million by 2030—advances in drug therapies, coupled with health-promoting lifestyle choices (e.g., good nutrition, regular exercise, smoking cessation), can help older adults lead more active, healthy lives for longer. When used appropriately, prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines can enhance quality of life by limiting loss of function and alleviating troublesome symptoms, and even extend life.

Despite these benefits, all medicines have risks, especially among older adults, who take more medicines than any other age group in the United States. This group is more likely to experience serious adverse drug events, which can result in additional illness, drug-related hospitalizations and even death. These adverse events -- 25% of which are preventable, according to research -- may include falls, depression, confusion, hallucinations and malnutrition, which are more common in older adults. In addition, this group tends to have more than one prescribing healthcare provider and uses at least one pharmacy, making it more difficult to track all of their medicines and identify potential problems (e.g., drug interactions, harmfully high doses, unnecessary medicines that carry no health benefits).

The use of multiple medicines is considered a leading drug safety issue among this patient population because of potential drug interactions or inappropriate prescribing. Data suggest 4 out of 5 older Americans live with one or more chronic conditions and 2 out of 5 report taking five or more prescription medicines. Many have to follow complicated dosage regimens. Further compounding this are age-related physiological changes, memory impairments, as well as vision and hearing loss, which can result in greater drug sensitivity and exaggerated effects and challenges taking medicines as prescribed.

Declines in liver and kidney function, for example, affect the way a drug is broken down and removed from the body. This means medicines may stay in the body longer and cause more severe side effects if doses are not properly adjusted and monitored. There is also increasing evidence of communication gaps between patients and physicians about medications. Many patients report skipping doses or stop taking their medicine(s) due to side effects, perceptions that the drug isn't working, or cost, often without talking with their provider. The confluence of these factors set the stage for dangerous health consequences, especially in those taking multiple medicines.

It is against this backdrop that the **National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE)** recently launched an interactive, national campaign called **Medication Use Safety Training for Seniors™ (MUST for Seniors™)**. This program promotes safe and appropriate medicine use by giving older adults and caregivers the tools and know-how to avoid medicine misuse, recognize and manage common side effects, and improve medicine use knowledge, attitudes, and skills to avoid medicine use related errors. **NCPIE** is providing an array of educational materials to stimulate in-person workshops across the country and online learning to educate older adults and caregivers about safe medicine use.

The risk of developing or being diagnosed with chronic conditions begins to increase in those over age 50. The importance of raising awareness of medicine use and health risks due to chronic illnesses was reflected in the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recent decision to lower the age for routine influenza vaccination (flu shot) from 65 to 50 given that roughly one-third of adults in this age group have a chronic medical condition that places them at high risk for influenza-related hospitalization and death. This group is also caring for aging parents, who likely use multiple medicines and may need extra support to avoid medicine use problems.

Memory aids can assist older adults in remembering to take their medicines. Taking medicines at a set time each day (e.g., at breakfast or bedtime), setting a timer, placing pill bottles in a noticeable location (away from young children's reach), using pill boxes for complicated regimens (especially for people who have difficulty opening pill bottles) or posting a medication checklist on the refrigerator are examples of strategies that can serve as useful reminders.

As the incidence of arthritis, diabetes, Alzheimer's and other chronic conditions continue to rise among older adults, the need for patients to follow **NCPIE's** guiding principle--**Educate Before You Medicate**--and be active partners in their health care is essential. The **MUST for Seniors™** program aims to spark a national dialogue about these issues and educate Americans about safe medicine use.

For more information about safe medicine use, fact sheets and tools to help keep track of your medicines, please visit www.mustforseniors.org.

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