

# Multiple Medications in Older Adults

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The NCPPIE Coalition, working to promote safe medicine use, offers [resources for older adults and caregivers](#).

Many health problems are associated with aging. It's not uncommon for an older adult to have several chronic or long-term health problems. For example, they may have arthritis, diabetes, and hypertension (high blood pressure). Older adults may also occasionally have acute or short-term illnesses such as a cold, flu, or urinary tract infection.

Chronic health problems are often treated with one or more medications. For example, someone may take one medication for arthritis, two for diabetes, and one for hypertension. If they get sick, they may take over-the-counter (OTC) medications to lower a fever, decrease pain, or help a stuffy nose. Although all of these medications may help, they may also cause problems when taken together. And as the body ages, it may also react differently to medication. Some harmful effects can become more likely.

Doctors who care for older adults have to prescribe medication very carefully.

## Too many medications

Taking more medication than clinically indicated — often established as the use of five or more medications by the same person at the same time — is called polypharmacy. It's a growing problem in the United States. It can be challenging for older adults, their caregivers, and their doctors. It may be hard for you or your caregiver to manage many medications. It's difficult for doctors to monitor the effects of the medications, as well.

One study found that, on average, people between 65 and 69 years of age take about 14 prescriptions each year. People between 80 and 84 years of age take about 18 prescriptions per year.

The more medications you take, the more likely problems are to occur. You may make mistakes when trying to manage many different drugs. Your doctors may not know what your other doctors are prescribing. More than one of your doctors may prescribe the same or similar medications. This can lead to serious problems such as overdosing (taking too much of a drug). Your different doctors may also prescribe medications that shouldn't be taken together. This can cause drug interactions, side effects, and other problems.

Often, at least one prescription drug that an older adult takes is unnecessary. According to a population-based [study](#), almost half of older adults were taking one or more drugs that were not needed. Unnecessary medication adds to the risk of drug interactions and side effects.

## OTC medications and dietary supplements

Polypharmacy, or using several medications, also includes OTC medications and dietary supplements.

You may not think OTC medications are as serious as prescription drugs. Still, some OTC medications or dietary supplements may interact with each other or prescription drugs. They can also cause side effects. And, again, because older adults' bodies may react to drugs in different ways, they have an increased chance of having problems with OTC medications.

## Reducing problems with medications

Interactions and side effects can have life-changing effects on older adults. For example, a common side effect is dizziness. If you're older, this can lead to a fall and possible head injury or broken bone. Or, if you have trouble with memory, you may have an even harder time when taking certain medications together. This may make it difficult to do your usual activities and may also result in an accident, injury, or other problem.

Doctors can take steps to prevent problems. Your doctor may:

- use the [Beers Criteria](#), a guide to check for high-risk medication safety, if you're older than 65 years
- work closely with any other doctors who are caring for you
- review your medications at each office visit and take you off of drugs you don't need
- make sure you understand how to take all of your medications
- tell you about side effects
- order blood tests to monitor some medications

To reduce your chances of problems, you can also try these tips:

- Ask your doctor questions about your medications and write down the answers. Make sure you know how to take each medication, including when you should stop taking it.
- Don't be afraid to ask if all of your medications are necessary.
- Make sure you tell each of your doctors about all of your medications. Don't forget OTC drugs, including those you only take from time to time. Also list any vitamins, minerals, herbal supplements, or other natural products that you use.
- Make sure you tell your doctors if you've stopped taking any medication on your own.
- Take all of your medications with you to your doctors' appointments, or keep an up-to-date list of them. Ask your doctor or nurse for help with the list.
- Take a friend or family member to your appointments. They can help you ask questions and understand answers.



NCPIE focuses on medication safety issues like adherence, preventing abuse, reducing errors, and better communication.

## Article Resources

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