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Healthy Insights

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How Many Medications Are You Currently Taking?

Adverse drug events (problems caused by a drug) lead to an estimated 600,000 emergency room visits for older adults in the United States each year. Part of the problem is that as we age, medications may react differently in our bodies. At the same time, taking unnecessary or too many medications can increase the risk of negative side effects, falls, and hospital visits. Learn more about how to actively manage your medications to prevent adverse drug events.

What Is Polypharmacy?

Polypharmacy is the practice of taking multiple medications regularly. It is more common for those with chronic conditions (arthritis, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and heart disease). It is more likely to occur when healthcare providers do not have access to your complete medical history or when your providers are not communicating with one another. When medications are regularly reviewed, the risks of polypharmacy can be reduced.

Get to Know the Difference

Not all products that you take for your health are the same. **Prescription medications** require a prescription from a healthcare provider and are used to treat specific conditions. **Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs** can be purchased without a prescription and are often used to treat common symptoms (pain, allergies, or colds).



Dietary supplements are used to maintain or improve health by helping you reach your daily requirements for vitamins and minerals.

How to Take Your Medications (Old and New) Safely

Keeping an up-to-date medication list and sharing it with your doctor or healthcare provider at every visit can help you and your healthcare providers stay aware of possible adverse drug events. Here are some other health habits you should add:

- Before starting something new, tell your healthcare provider about every medication, OTC drug, and dietary supplement you take.
- Share any allergies or side effects you have had with any medications.
- Ask your healthcare provider if what they are prescribing could negatively mix with any existing medications you are currently taking or if it could cause negative side effects.
- Write down the medication's name, the dosage, why you are taking it, the time(s) you take it, and which doctor prescribed it.

- Visit your primary care physician at least once a year. They understand the bigger picture of your health by communicating with your other doctors.
- Memorize the shapes, sizes, and colors of your medications so you can tell them apart. Always check the expiration date on the bottle.



Be Aware of Interactions

Some medications may be harmful when taken together. A few examples to be aware of include:

- Some common medications, including cholesterol-lowering statins, blood pressure medications, heart rhythm medications, anti-anxiety medications, blood thinners, and migraine medications should not be taken with grapefruit or grapefruit juice.
- Certain blood pressure and heart failure medications and antibiotics when mixed with potassium supplements may unsafely increase potassium levels.
- Opioid pain medications taken with benzodiazepines can cause drowsiness and slowed breathing.

- Taking multiple medications with anticholinergic effects, such as oxybutynin, diphenhydramine, atropine, and ipratropium, can increase confusion, dizziness, falls, and memory issues.
- Using several medications that affect the central nervous system can raise the risk of falls and fractures.

Ask About Deprescribing

If you are taking more than one medication, consider talking with your healthcare provider about deprescribing (the process of decreasing or stopping something that may no longer be necessary or could be causing harm). Your provider can help decide which drugs continue to provide benefits, and which can be stopped. Switching to a lower dose or safer medication may also be an option to consider with your provider. Remember to always talk to your healthcare provider before stopping any medication.

Additional Resources

- **Taking Medicines Safely as You Age** | NIA NIH bit.ly/4fJfd4g
- **The dangers of polypharmacy and the case for deprescribing in older adults** | NIA NIH bit.ly/4hKdazG
- **Polypharmacy** | Cleveland Clinic bit.ly/3TYVvdH
- **FastStats: Medication Safety Data** | CDC bit.ly/4byGLbr
- **9 Drug Interactions That Can Be More Dangerous As You Age** | GoodRx bit.ly/3TXLihA
- **Anticholinergic Drugs** | Cleveland Clinic bit.ly/3RJU9Tv

IPro Healthy Insights comes from Dr. Clare Bradley, IPro's Senior Vice President/Chief Medical Officer, a nationally recognized public health advocate.

IPro is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, providers and patients to measure and improve healthcare for all. For over 35 years we've made creative use of clinical expertise, emerging technology and data solutions to make the healthcare system work better.



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