



## **Polypharmacy: When medications cause problems**

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### **Multiple medication usage in seniors is becoming recognized problem**

Medication-related problems that develop for seniors and others on more than five medications, is a major reason for emergency room visits and hospital admissions. The use of many medications is so common and widespread that the healthcare industry has given it a name: “**polypharmacy.**” Older patients can have more medical conditions that result in more medication use, more interactions, and more side effects. The more medications taken, the greater potential for problems.

“**Polypharmacy,**” or the use of multiple medications, whether the medications are prescription or non-prescription, supplements or nutritional, is also a primary cause of caregiver burden. Patients, their loved ones and caregivers often fail to understand the impact that multiple medications can have on a loved one’s health and continued well-being. This is especially true for patients over 65 years of age.

### **Medication related problems that result from “polypharmacy” can be arranged into various groups:**

- Doses that may be too high or when a patient takes too much.
- Medications that don’t reach an effective blood level.
- Medication not taken the correct way or not taken at all.
- Medications used improperly, inconsistently, or longer than needed.
- Medication treatment that is overlooked or unreported.
- Drug interactions and adverse reactions.
- Medications that don’t produce the benefits for which they are prescribed.
- Accumulation of the same side-effect from many different medications.

For example, if each medication can cause drowsiness, that side effect will often worsen as more medications with that side effect are taken. This is called the additive effect or the piling on of a side effect.

All patients, families and caregivers are encouraged to give careful consideration to one important question, "Could the changes I have been seeing in my loved one be the result of their medications or how they are using them?" Acting on that one question will make your other decisions and actions at the time of hospital discharge or a change in care plans, more productive and beneficial.

**If the medication related problems and their causes continue to be unaddressed, all other decisions are compromised.**

- When you discuss the need to make the home safer, please realize if medications continue to cause dizziness and falls, the home remains unsafe.
- When decisions are made to change diets or arrange meal delivery, please realize that weight, strength and appetite may not improve if medications continue to contribute to changes in appetite or absorption of the nutrients.
- Plans to keep a senior more mentally active may not be accomplished if the accumulated side effects of multiple medications cause changes in mental function.

Medications may be used differently to get better results and fewer side effects. All patients and caregivers are encouraged to understand that medications are an extremely important part of their health care plan. Many times medications cannot cure health problems but treat conditions and slow the decline in health. The proper use of all medications at an optimal dose is essential to achieve the desired results and further slow the decline in health. It is absolutely necessary that patients, family and caregivers learn about the unique group of medications that are being used and how to achieve maximum benefit from their use.

**Where does one start to address medication concerns?**

A comprehensive medication review by a trained pharmacist or geriatric health care provider is the first step. A professional review will start with an overall analysis of the current medications in use. From there, the professional can liaison with the prescribing health care providers and

pharmacies to optimize the medications, dosages and schedule. This type of review can result in fewer medications, better response to current medications, and fewer side effects, thereby reducing emergency room and hospital visits and lessening caregiver burden.

