

PUBLIC HEALTH

Patient sheet:

Tips for avoiding problems with polypharmacy

Polypharmacy is a major problem among elderly patients. In the spirit of helping patients and their families to better understand the problem and how to deal with it, we offer this special Public Health column, directed to a lay audience. We hope that you will share this article with anyone in your practice for whom the suggestions listed may be helpful. — Editor, *CMAJ*

Many drugs are used today for the prevention and treatment of diseases and other medical conditions. They are either prescribed by health care practitioners, including doctors and dentists, or are available over the counter without a prescription. More and more patients are also taking natural health products (e.g., herbal remedies and dietary supplements). Each of these drugs and natural health products can cause side effects or can react with other drugs.

Elderly patients tend to have medical conditions that require them to take multiple drugs (polypharmacy). With each additional medication taken, they are at increased risk of adverse reactions from side effects and from interactions between drugs. Polypharmacy can also make drug regimens complex and difficult to follow correctly.

The tips in Box 1 emphasize the importance of knowledge, communication and organization and should help patients minimize their risk of adverse reactions from polypharmacy.

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Box 1: Tips for patients to minimize their risk of adverse reactions when taking multiple drugs (polypharmacy)

Know your medications

- What are their names?
- Why are you taking them?
- How should your drugs be taken?
- What are their most common and most serious side effects?
- What should you do if problems arise?
- What should you do if you miss a dose?
- If you have been in hospital, do you know what you should be taking when you are discharged? (A lot of changes may have been made to your medications during your hospital stay. When discharged, it is important that you know what you should be taking)

Communicate with your doctor and pharmacist

- Tell your doctor and pharmacist about all of the drugs you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs, dietary supplements and herbal remedies
- Do not expect a “pill for every ill.” Some health concerns will go away without treatment or be better managed by therapies other than drugs. Discuss with your doctor how best to deal with your health concerns and consider all treatment options
- Inform your doctor about any allergies or reactions you have had to drugs in the past
- Tell your doctor about any problems that develop after starting a new drug
- Do not stop taking a prescribed drug without talking it over with your doctor. Before starting an over-the-counter agent, supplement or herbal remedy, check with your doctor or pharmacist to ensure that it will be safe to take

Be organized

- Keep an up-to-date written list of all the drugs, dietary supplements and herbal remedies that you are taking
- When you see your doctor, be prepared. Before the visit, think about what you want to talk about and write it down if necessary
- Periodically review your list of drugs and over-the-counter products with your doctor. Ask whether it is necessary for you to continue taking everything on the list
- Take your medications as directed
- Do not share your drugs
- Do not save prescribed drugs for future use “just in case” unless you are asked to do so by your doctor. Do not keep old medications (check the expiry date on the pill bottle)
- Store your drugs in a secure, dry place out of sunlight. Find out if your medications should be refrigerated
- Use devices (e.g., a blister pack or 7-day pill organizer) to help you take your drugs as directed
- It is generally better to have one physician prescribing and one pharmacy dispensing your medications. This makes it easier for your doctor and pharmacist to watch for potential adverse reactions between drugs