

A pill for every ill



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So many medications

By Julie Cheney, RN

Do you take more than a few medications? Have you been taking some for many years in the same way? Do you remember why you take all of them?

Now, we're not saying to stop all your medications at once! We are saying, however, that we all need to be conscious of how many we take and when they were last reviewed in a meaningful way.

When a person is in their later years, their body changes in so many ways. The ways the older person's internal processes work also change. This means the chemicals in medications interacting in an older person's body (over 80) can lead to medications taken up faster or slower, or having greater interactions with each other than in a younger body (50's). This can lead to serious side effects, or at least effects that are unwanted.

The use of multiple medications at once is called polypharmacy. Polypharmacy is a regularly cited cause of people having falls and being hospitalised due to interactions that were not anticipated or adjusted for.

Reviews of medications by registered pharmacists can alert doctors to potentially problematic combinations and if there are alternatives that could be used which have less chance of interacting.

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What are the reviews about?

The problem of polypharmacy is all over the developed world and a lot of research has been conducted about the problem. One of the findings is that a person taking fewer medications will also generally feel greater quality of life. The research has also shown significant statistics of health problems related to interacting medications. The outcome is that governments have set up systems to help people have a full medication review regularly, at least every 1 - 2 years.

In Australia, we have Medicare items that cover the review of medications both in the community and in residential aged care facilities, for people who are at risk of medication related problems, polypharmacy being the major concern. These are called a Home Medicines Review or a Residential Medication Management Review. Your doctor must request the review by a pharmacist, but you could also prompt your doctor about concerns if you are taking many medications, particularly if you don't feel great after taking your medicines, or if you have been taking the same medication for many years.

In some cases, the review can find that some medications should be removed and in others, the medication might need to be changed to a milder one, or one that works a little differently but with fewer interactions. For some people it might mean needing a boost by a mineral supplement or a fluid intake or dietary measure. For others, the review might find the medications you take are the best ones for your body and your conditions. Whatever the result, even if it is no change for now, the review can give you and your doctor peace of mind that you are on the best combination of medicines for you and that the latest information about medication has been used to consider your needs.

“All medications can become poisons if used incorrectly”



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How's the memory?

Another serious problem for older people, in relation to their medication use, is remembering when to take things. There are a number of issues that face older people which can cause them to take incorrect doses and schedules of medications. Below is a brief list of common errors to consider. Have you done any of these? (Be honest with yourself!)

- Missing a pill so taking 2 to make up for it the next day
- Missing a pill at a scheduled time then taking it and the next one due at the same time
- Missing pills all together, regularly
- Taking them at incorrect times
- Taking them only when you feel unwell, but they are ordered as regular medicines
- Taking your spouse's medication because it seemed to work for him/her
- Stopping antibiotics after a couple of days because you feel a bit better
- Taking someone else's unfinished antibiotics for a couple of days just in case
- Stopping all of your medications without any supervision of it
- Not filling some 'scripts in favour of others because of costs issues
- Not filling scripts until they are already run out for days
- Not getting scripts in time from your doctor.



At Later Years Support

We endeavor to provide useful, practical ways to support people in their later years, and their families. We utilise current evidence where possible, reputable health related sources and decades of experience with older people to guide our information. We offer suggestions that are general in nature and do not attempt to cover all needs of all people, or to be considered the only advice sought for a person's concerns. We recommend everyone seeks professional advice in any circumstance of complex health and wellbeing concerns.

A checklist to give you hints

<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Have a clear list of medications that you currently take and include why you take them.</p> <p>- update this regularly</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Do you need a dosage aid? This can help you remember each day and whether you have already taken them.</p> <p>They can be small plastic ones you pack yourself</p> <p>Or you can pay your pharmacist to pack them in hard or soft packs (e.g. Webster or sachets)</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>When you go to the doctor always take a note pad and write down the medication the doctor tells you to take and how you are meant to take them.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Store your medications as they are meant (e.g. fridge or out of sunlight)</p> <p>Keep them in a n easy to find and use container, together if possible so that you can see when they are due to be replaced.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Set up a system with the pharmacy for ease of ordering or reminders of due 'scripts</p> <p>Use the same pharmacy that can ensure a consistent support network for your needs.</p> <p>Some pharmacies have phone reminder systems</p> <p>Most pharmacies will hold your 'scripts and call you when they are to be renewed</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Schedule regular review visits with your doctor to get scripts in time</p>

IN SUMMARY

1. Polypharmacy is the term for many medications
2. Too many medications can be harmful
3. There are reviews available by your pharmacist at the doctor's request
4. Taking medications as ordered is often fraught with problems of memory and unsafe choices
5. There are aids and support systems available to help with the process of medication supply and reminders