

Talking about prescription drug misuse



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As we age, our bodies become more vulnerable to the effects of prescription drug use. Our metabolism changes, and we often use more prescription drugs than in the past. If we misuse our



medicines or take them in a manner not prescribed, we increase the risk of negative effects.

It is estimated that over 35 million Americans are ages 65 and older, which represents roughly 12.4% of the total population. As baby boomers age, this population is expected to increase to 70 million, or 20% of the population. Clearly, educating ourselves, aging parents or other relatives and friends about the risk of prescription drug misuse is crucial.

Older adults tend to need more kinds of medication to help their bodies stay healthy. This itself creates increased risk for misuse.

In addition, the way the aging body metabolizes, distributes and removes medication changes. Changes in body weight, circulation and liver and kidney function all impact how medicines affect the body.

Why are older adults misusing medicines?

Most older adults don't misuse their prescription medications intentionally, but it can happen in several ways:

- Misunderstanding directions regarding quantity and frequency of use.
- Dangerous drug interactions. Often older adults see multiple doctors who may not always communicate with one another regarding potential dangerous side effects from certain drug combinations.
- Mixing medications with alcohol or other drugs, including herbal supplements and vitamins, can cause harmful interactions and may create symptoms that mimic mental health disorders or diseases more common among older adults such as Alzheimer's disease.

In some cases the misuse is intentional, such as taking too much of an anti-anxiety medicine because it helps the older adult feel better, but since the drugs being abused are not

“illegal” like cocaine or marijuana, the perception of harm and the stigma related to misuse are not as great. This can lead the older adult to believe that what they are doing is not dangerous.

In addition to physical changes that affect how medications impact the body, older adults are also facing significant life changes. Loss of a spouse, retirement, loneliness, isolation, death of friends, loss of physical function such as eyesight, hearing or mobility or lack of family contact can all influence the way a person feels and the choices he or she makes. This may cause prescription misuse or other drug abuse which can cause symptoms of diseases common to older adults such as depression and dementia.

Commonly misused prescription and OTC drugs

The most commonly misused or abused prescriptions among older adults drugs fall into two categories.

Opioids are narcotic painkillers such as Morphine, Codeine, oxycodone and hydrocodone. They are commonly prescribed to relieve



severe pain, and with proper medical management their use is safe and rarely causes addiction.

When abused, these drugs cause symptoms similar to those of heroin — a surge of euphoria followed by alternating wakefulness and

drowsiness and cloudy mental thinking due to depression of the central nervous system. **Opioids are often associated with addiction and fatal overdose.**

Withdrawal produces drug craving, restlessness, muscle and bone pain, insomnia, diarrhea and vomiting, cold flashes with goose bumps (“cold turkey”), kicking movements and other symptoms. Major withdrawal symptoms peak between 48 and 72 hours after the last dose and subside after about a week.

Central nervous system (CNS) depressants such as Xanax and Valium are used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders, and slow normal brain function by decreasing brain activity. This can be helpful for someone suffering from anxiety or a sleep disorder, **but when these drugs are misused they can be addictive and even deadly.**

Prescribed doses of CNS depressants may be inappropriately high for older

adults. Their bodies don't metabolize the drugs efficiently, thus causing problems to occur more quickly. Since these types of medications can make people feel and sleep better, it may encourage misuse.

CNS depressants shouldn't be combined with other medications

or substances that cause sleepiness such as alcohol, prescription pain medication or some over-the-counter allergy and cold medications. **Doing so can slow breathing or slow the heart rate and respiration which can be fatal.**



Signs of medication misuse

It is important that older adults and their caretakers understand the impact that misuse of prescription medicine can have and recognize some of the signals that may indicate a problem.

Many of these signs can also be caused by an undiagnosed illness such as Alzheimer's disease, dementia, Parkinson's disease or depression, so it is important to rule that out as a cause.

- Unexplained memory loss or forgetfulness
- Lack of coordination (falling, stumbling)
- Excessive tiredness
- Slurred speech
- Lack of personal hygiene (bathing, brushing teeth, clean clothes)
- Moodiness
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Isolation (not wanting to see friends or family)
- Difficulty concentrating or completing sentences
- Changes in eating habits
- "Zombie" like behavior (motionless, unresponsive to others, unaware of surroundings)



Steps that you or your caretaker can take to reduce the risk of prescription misuse

When visiting the doctor or pharmacist:

- Keep a list of all your doctors, the reasons you are seeing them and a list of all the medicines and supplements you take — prescription, over-the-counter, vitamins, herbals and dietary supplements. Each time you visit your doctor or pharmacist it is important that you share this information with him or her.
- Talk to your doctors and pharmacist about food or medicine allergies or other medical problems that could affect your ability to take certain medications.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what to expect from drugs you are prescribed. Make sure you feel you have the information needed to effectively manage your health and your medications.

- Ask if there is a risk of addiction to the drug. Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist how to avoid problems with the drug.
- If you're in recovery from drug addiction, make sure your doctors know. Many medications prescribed for pain, insomnia and anxiety can be addictive. If your doctors know your history, they can look for drugs that are unlikely to trigger addiction.
- Ask the doctor, medical staff or pharmacist to give you written advice or directions. You can then review the information in a less stressful environment.
- Try to use the same pharmacy for all your prescriptions. This allows your pharmacist to know what you are taking and alert you to potential side effects or negative drug interactions.
- Refer to your pharmacist when you have questions about your medicines.
- Keep track of side effects and let the doctor or pharmacist know if you experience unexplained symptoms or changes in the way you feel.
- Have your medicines reviewed by your doctors and pharmacist at least twice a year.

At home:

- Carefully follow directions on all medications, including OTC drugs and supplements. If labels are hard to read, ask your pharmacist to use large type or have someone type or write directions on a slip of paper and tape it to the medicine bottle.
- Be aware of warnings on OTC medications, prescriptions and supplements concerning use of alcohol or other medications with that drug. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure.
- Devise a daily or weekly medication schedule to reduce the likelihood of misuse.
- Don't share your medicines with your friends or family members. Only your doctor should diagnose and treat a health problem. It is also illegal to give prescription medicine to another person.
- If dealing with your medicines becomes confusing, ask someone to help you. If a family member or friend is not available, many communities have home health aides or visiting nurses who can help.

For more information, visit the Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center website at www.drugfreeinfo.org or call toll-free 1-866-242-4111.

Resources

Iowa Area Agencies on Aging
1-866-468-7887

Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center
1-866-242-4111
www.drugfreeinfo.org

National Institute on Drug Abuse
www.nida.nih.gov



For more information or a copy of this booklet, please contact the Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy.

515-242-6391 ■ www.iowa.gov/odcp

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