

# Managing Medications

Improper use of medications can cause serious problems for seniors and their families



## About NuevaCare

NuevaCare provides non-medical home care services to seniors who need assistance with their activities of daily living.

Our services include:

- . Medication reminders
- . Respite care
- . Grocery shopping
- . Errands & household duties
- . Transportation
- . Supervise walking and fall prevention
- . Light housekeeping
- . Laundry/ironing & changing bed linens
- . Socialization & companionship
- . Alzheimer's/Dementia support
- . Ambulation assistance
- . Incontinence support
- . Bathing & grooming supervision
- . Meal planning & preparation
- . Hygiene assistance
- . Dressing assistance

The average 65 - 69 year-old fills 13.6 prescriptions per year, while those 80 - 84 years old have 18.2 prescriptions filled annually. Taking multiple medications and seeing different doctors can be a prescription for a serious medication problem.

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon and Jeremy was about to turn the football game on when the phone rang. He picked it up to hear his 83-year-old mother, Louise, speaking incoherently.

Jeremy immediately called 911 to have an ambulance sent to his mother's home, and raced to the local hospital emergency department to meet it. At first, doctors thought Louise had suffered a stroke, until further tests ruled it out. A neurologist then diagnosed her with Alzheimer's disease.

Jeremy had a hard time believing the diagnosis – only the weekend before he had spent hours with his mother and she had seemed perfectly lucid. He immediately

scheduled an appointment with a geriatrician, who saw the problem quite differently. Louise, he discovered, didn't have dementia, but had suffered an adverse reaction to her medication.

Louise's case is hardly unique. It is estimated that 38 million older Americans suffer drug complications every year, about 180,000 of which are life-threatening. Symptoms may appear as other problems common to seniors: weakness, fatigue, dizziness, loss of balance, or disorientation.

## A Senior Problem

The fact that seniors are most prone to medication problems is not surprising when you consider that seniors have more chronic diseases and multiple conditions. In addition, many see multiple physicians for their various ailments. Couple this with the physiological changes of aging, which alter the way a body processes and reacts to certain medications, and you can see the potential for disaster.

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Further compounding the problem is an economic reality: many seniors may not be taking the medications they need because they cannot afford them. In addition to often being on fixed incomes, they spend nearly four times as much on prescription medications as those under age 65.

Common drug-to-drug interactions include aspirin with a blood thinner like Coumadin, or certain diabetic medications; antacids with heart and blood pressure medications; and antihistamines and antidepressants.

There can also be problems when certain medications are taken with such common foods as dairy products, caffeine, fruit juices and alcohol, or with herbal supplements like ginkgo biloba or kava kava.

## Serious Problems

The most serious medication problems involving seniors tend to focus around these scenarios:

- Not taking medicine correctly – either forgetting to take it or failing to follow instructions
- Allergic reactions
- Drug side effects
- Drug interactions

- Duplication
- Wrong dosage
- Unnecessary or inappropriate usage

## Seniors and Medication

Many seniors buy into these common myths about medication usage:

- If one drug makes me feel good, a larger dose will make me feel better.
- If one drug does not work, I should take two or three.
- If I can buy it over the counter, it must be safe.
- If my physician has not stopped the medication, I can still use it.
- If it helped my friend, it will help me.
- If my friend has some extra medication that I have been taking, I can use it too.

## Recommended Steps

Here are some protocols seniors and their family caregivers should follow when it comes to managing their medications:

- Toss out any expired or discontinued prescription medication.
- Only use medication that has been prescribed for you.
- Drink a full glass of water and do not lie down for at least 30 minutes after taking medication.
- Have prescriptions filled in the same pharmacy.
- Check the label of your prescription to verify that it's the right medication.
- When possible, keep all medications in their original container.
- Know what to do if you miss a dose.
- Do not share or take any one else's medication.
- Tell your health care provider if you are taking any dietary supplements or over-the-counter medications.
- Prepare a list of all medications and give copies to family members and bring them to all health care appointments.