



Stewardship of the Body

“I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made” (Ps. 139)

Polypharmacy

What is polypharmacy? Polypharmacy is a term that means “many drugs”. It refers to problems that can occur when a patient is taking more medications than are actually needed. It is a particular concern for older adults, who make up 13% of the population but account for almost 30% of all prescribed drugs.

Who is at risk for polypharmacy? If you are aged 65 or older, chances are you are taking one or more prescription drugs as well as products that you can buy over the counter (OTC). On average, at any given time, an elderly person takes 4 or 5 prescription drugs and 2 OTCs. While such medicines can help maintain health and prevent further illness, taking combinations of drugs means that you could be at risk for unwanted drug interactions.

How do you know if you are at risk for polypharmacy? Ask yourself some questions and if you answer “yes” to any of them, you may be at risk for polypharmacy:

- Do you take herbs, vitamins or over-the-counter (OTC) products?
- Do you have to take medicine more than once a day?
- Do you suffer from arthritis?
- Do you use different pharmacies to fill your prescriptions?
- Do you have poor eyesight or hearing?
- Do you live alone?
- Do you sometimes forget to take your medicines?

How do polypharmacy problems occur? If a person is taking several medications as well as OTCs, they are at increased risk for developing an adverse drug event (ADE). Some people have more than one chronic disorder for which they are seeing different doctors and getting prescriptions from each.

In elderly people, the changes that occur with aging can affect the way medications work in the body, such as how the body absorbs the medication, distributes it to parts of the body, and clears it from the body. The more medications a person takes, the greater the chance that one drug will interfere with the absorption of another.

Problems with medications are not just caused by interactions between drugs, but by problems that can occur before the person even takes a drug. Examples include: having poor eyesight so they can't read the medicine labels, having arthritis and can't open the bottle, having difficulty swallowing pills or having trouble remembering to take the medicine.

Many older adults are on some prescription medicines and also may be taking over the counter preparations such as herbs or vitamins, often because someone has suggested them. Research shows overwhelmingly that

people who use herbs, vitamins or other over-the-counter (OTC) products do so without talking to a physician or pharmacist first to see if there may be a potential problem.

Other problems may be caused by the strategies that older people use to lower costs, perhaps only taking medications when they are in pain, or taking half the prescribed amount, or just not filling all of their prescriptions. Some older adults also drink alcohol or smoke regularly. Any or all of these factors could combine to cause problems.

Is polypharmacy a problem just for elderly people? Polypharmacy is not just a problem for older people, although that is the population that is most at risk. It can happen with anyone who is taking multiple medications and/or OTCs, including children.

What can be done to prevent polypharmacy problems? As long as your doctor monitors your medications carefully, the benefits from them can far outweigh the risks. Polypharmacy doesn't have to happen. However, if you feel that you are taking too many drugs, talk to your doctor. There are many ways that patients, physicians and pharmacists can work together to help prevent the problems that might occur if a person is taking several medications. Keep the following points in mind:

- Avoid combination products such as cold formulas. Ask your pharmacist to help you find a product just for your symptoms and not for every possible symptom.
- Make sure you (and your primary caregiver, if you have one) are aware of all other doctors or caregivers who prescribe medications.
- Bring your pill bottles to every appointment.
- Learn your medicines by name and what they are for.
- Ask your primary caregiver or your pharmacist to run your medication list through a drug interactions database to identify possible problems.
- If you do find a possible problem, check with your doctor. Sometimes doctors prescribe medications that could be risky, but the patient's condition means that it is more risky not to take them.
- Carry your current medications list everywhere and take it to your doctor each time you have an appointment.
- If you have trouble remembering or get your medications mixed up, ask for help from a relative, friend or nurse to find a way to organize and keep track of them.
- If you can't afford your medications, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about ways to decrease costs.

Sources:

<http://prescriptions.uchicago.edu/Polypharmacy>

Polypharmacy: Keeping the elderly safe, by James M. Wooten, PharmD & Julie Galavis, Rn, BSN. Modern Medicine, August 1, 2005.