

Polypharmacy

Polypharmacy occurs when a person is taking many different medications at the same time.

This often happens when a person has many chronic diseases, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart failure, osteoporosis, and/or symptoms such as pain or insomnia, requiring long-term treatment with medications. Chronic diseases and symptoms accumulate with age; for this reason, older adults are at higher risk of polypharmacy.

What Are the Risks of Polypharmacy?

- The use of many different medications at the same time can lead to mistakes in storing or taking them correctly. Clinicians may not know what medicines their patients are taking, leading to prescribing errors. For example, the same type of medication might be prescribed twice.
- A medication might not work as well when used with other medications that interfere with its effect. This is known as a drug-drug interaction.
- A medication used to treat a disease or symptom might have a negative effect on another disease or symptom. This is known as drug-disease interaction. For example, anti-inflammatory medications, commonly used as pain killers, may increase blood pressure and worsen kidney function and therefore should not be used by persons with high blood pressure or kidney problems.

What Should I Do if I Am Taking Many Medications?

1. Always keep an accurate and updated list of medications you are taking. This should include those prescribed by your doctor, over-the-counter drugs, herbal products, and supplements. Always keep this list with you and update it any time your medication prescriptions change.
2. Make sure your doctor knows all the over-the-counter medications and supplements you are taking.
3. Understand why you are taking the medications prescribed for you. Discuss with your doctor what side effects to look out for and ask if any symptoms you may be having (for example, nausea, lightheadedness, clouded thinking) could be a medication side effect. If needed, consult websites and online documents reporting drug information (for example, US National Library of Medicine's Medline Plus site [<https://medlineplus.gov/druginformation.html>]).
4. Periodically discuss your medication regimens with your doctor. Ask if there are any medications you can do without. Some diseases or symptoms might worsen your health and quality of life, so treating them with appropriate medications is a priority. Other diseases or symptoms might have a limited effect on your health

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Tips for Managing Polypharmacy



Keep an accurate, updated list of your prescribed medications.
Ask each clinician you visit to review your list.



Inform your doctor of any supplements, herbal products, and over-the-counter medications you are taking.



Understand why you are taking each of your medications.
Be aware of what side effects to look out for.



Discuss ways to simplify your medication regimen with your doctor.
Ask if you can discontinue any medications.



Take all medications as prescribed.
Do not suddenly stop taking any prescribed medication.

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and quality of life; therefore, some medications used in their treatment might be avoided. Getting family and caregivers involved is useful, especially if you have memory problems. Ask your doctor if there are any medicines you no longer need and if lifestyle changes (for example, diet, physical activity, and weight loss) may help you discontinue some of your medications.

5. Avoid suddenly stopping prescribed medications. If you have problems taking your medications correctly, discuss with your doctor the possibility of simplifying your medication regimen or choosing medications that you can take fewer times a day. If needed, use aids or tools to simplify medication use (for example, weekly or daily pill boxes).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov/health/safe-use-medicines-older-adults

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