

WARNING: Medications Have The Power to Heal or to Harm
By Elana Peters

Pills, pills, pills! Advertisements for medications are seen everywhere: Television, newspapers, magazines, email and pop-up ads on the Internet. It's scary! People of all ages are increasingly coming into contact with and using powerful medications that possess the potential both to heal and/or to harm. However, prescribed medications and those purchased over-the-counter (OTC) can be a means of staying healthy, getting better, and controlling health problems.

The appropriate medication, taken correctly (that is according to directions and in the right amount) can produce the right results. Present day medications are used to reduce or eliminate the symptoms of a disease, slow a disease process, or even cure a disease. Some medications can even be a cost-effective alternative to many surgeries or to loss of health and independence. Medications are the most common treatment for many diseases and conditions seen in older people. The use of multiple medications seems to be common for those older adults with one or more of the chronic illnesses. While they are essential for relief and improving quality of life, they can also complicate current health problems, and reduce physical and mental functioning.

Medications have the potential to cause serious harm on a wide scale, as several recent studies have pointed out. Although the studies focused on all age groups, it is reasonable to expect that older adults, with their vulnerabilities to medication related problems, have a higher incidence of adverse outcomes. In a 1998 study reported in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, it showed that even when taken as directed, adverse drug reactions can occur. This study estimated that 106,000 fatal adverse drug reactions occur annually.

Overmedication or mis-medication is the cause of hospital admission for at least 30% of Medicare patients. Recent studies have shown that older adults (65 and over) are especially vulnerable to medication-related problems, as they are the greatest consumers of prescriptions and over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Because they may be suffering from one or more chronic illnesses, they are more likely to be taking multiple medications concurrently. Although age-related changes vary, in general, changes in metabolism and body structure begin around age 50. As this occurs, medications begin to stay in the body longer, so they build up and can cause multiple side effects such as dizziness, falling, forgetfulness, agitation and depression.

What is over medication and/or mis-medication? Overmedication occurs when a person takes more than the prescribed amount of medication. Drugs are powerful chemical compounds and it is always a mistake to think that if one pill will help, then two will be better! Sometimes, physicians prescribe a medication at every office visit- and if not, the older adult may feel as if he/she has not done a thorough job. Mixing prescription drugs with OTC medications, herbal remedies, or alcohol, can also cause undesirable interactions and serious side effects. For example, taking Aricept, a drug for memory enhancement, should not be combined with Ginkgo Biloba, an herbal supplement that claims to improve memory. All medications do not act in the same way for every individual.

Mis-medication occurs when a patient is given the wrong medication for their individual system. Both over-medication and mis-medication are serious problems that can be avoided.

Warning signs that an older adult may be over-medicated or mis-medicated:

- * Confusion
- * Agitation
- * Drowsiness
- * Poor balance
- * Falls
- * Depressive symptoms
- * Sleeplessness

Steps that can be taken to avoid drug overmedication:

- * Keep a current list of all medications being taken; include why it is being taken.
- * Ask the doctor and read the literature about possible side effects and interactions of medicines.
- * Bring current list of all medications to each doctor's visit.
- * Use a weekly pill organizer to avoid confusion.
- * Use only one pharmacy, choose one that is convenient.
- * Check expiration dates. If you have questions, consult the doctor to see if the medication is still needed.

The latest and greatest medication is often prescribed by physicians without them having read about the side effects or inquiring into the older adult's daily regimen of activities including water intake. Many of the newer medications have not been tested on older adults so caution is suggested. Ask the pharmacist for a copy of the printout that comes from the manufacturer and read it. It may spare the older adult from problems, additional illness, and/or recovery time.

When used properly and monitored, medications help older adults to live longer and live better. Be a wise and informed consumer: read the literature and ask questions before you swallow.

On-line information:

FDA's MedWatch www.fda.gov/medwatch/how.htm

Information on the functions and potential benefits of vitamins and minerals
www.iom.edu/iom/iomhome.nsf/Pages/FNB+Reports

Alliance for Aging Research www.agingresearch.org