



## **Prescription Medication and Seniors: Risks and Rewards**

Over the past decade, we have seen dramatic improvements in technology that have led to medical breakthroughs and new drugs that have drastically improved the lives of millions of people. As technology improves, the ability to discover new ways of targeting specific diseases becomes a reality like never before. Recent discoveries have led to new medication for the most promising cancer treatment to drugs that reduce symptoms for diabetic nerve pain and restless leg syndrome. And the pharmaceutical industry is spending millions of dollars in television ads to promote their drugs. Patients are walking into doctor's offices asking for certain medication. Physicians are having to see more patients and spend less time with them, relying on prescription medication to provide instant gratification for symptom relief without spending time to treat the cause. In other words, prescription medication is so widespread that people are becoming desensitized to how many they're taking. And doctors seem to be willing to accommodate their patients with more drugs.

Maybe a better way to describe the situation is like this: There's nothing wrong with taking several medications for multiple problems. Medicine is an important tool for allowing us to live well and live longer – but there's also additional risks the more we take and the older we get. *This is where caregivers and senior citizens always have to be alert and very careful since many drugs look alike.*

Among Americans age 60 and over, more than 76% use two or more prescription drugs and 37% use five or more.<sup>1</sup> This likely represents the need to treat several chronic conditions as we get older. Clearly, the more drugs that are taken, the more confusion about when and how much to take, adverse reactions between drugs and duplicate medication from multiple doctors becomes all too common. Safety and quality of life is directly impacted by these risk factors.

### **Risk Factors for Seniors**

- **Confusion** – most seniors have a designated time each week when they organize and sort out their medications in their daily pill holder. Confusion easily occurs if: 1) they're interrupted while sorting through their meds; 2) there's a change in color or shape of a pill and; 3) there's a lack of communication with their doctor. For seniors who do their

own sorting, confusion can be one of the most common factors in over-medication, under-medication or duplicating pills that look alike.

- **Non-Adherence** – Overall, 41% of seniors and 52% of those with three or more chronic conditions reported being non-adherent [not taking their prescriptions as directed by their doctor(s)].<sup>2</sup> The main factors for non-adherence are: 1) forgetfulness; 2) cost; 3) bothersome side effects; 4) feeling well enough to where they believe they don't need to take their medication as prescribed; and 5) a lack of understanding of their disease. According to the World Health Organization, medication non-adherence is 50% among those with chronic illnesses. Consequences of medication non-adherence includes a worsening of the medical condition, increased healthcare costs and premature death.<sup>3</sup>
- **Adverse Reactions** – Prescription medicine, dietary supplements and herbal remedies can interfere with one another and heighten or reduce the intended effect and purpose of the drug(s). For example, Warfarin, a blood thinner to prevent blood clots, in combination with aspirin, ibuprofen or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) greatly increases the risk of serious gastrointestinal problems. Nutritional supplements, such as iron and calcium, can interfere with thyroid medicine.<sup>4</sup>
- **Duplicate Medications (Over-Medication)** – Over-medication usually occurs when multiple physicians are involved in the care of a patient. “My cardiologist told me to take this”, they say and “my internist” or “my rheumatologist”, etc. which many times ends up being the same medication duplicated by two or more doctors. Most of the time these physicians don't talk to one another so there's no “quarterback” to see the big picture and not duplicate what the other doctors are prescribing. Duplication is often seen in blood pressure medication, sleeping pills, anxiety medication, pain medication and blood thinners. Over-medication causes serious side effects that may resemble other medical problems – ironically creating another prescription medication to treat the symptom of a problem caused by too much medicine in the first place.
- **Missing Refills** – Another problem created by multiple doctors prescribing multiple medications is missing refills. In most cases, before a doctor will refill a prescription, they need to physically see the patient to assess their condition and make any changes to strength and frequency of their medication. If a patient is taking 6 medications from 3 different physicians, they will need to refill at various times during the year. If they wait until they are out or almost out of their medication, they won't get a refill until they see the doctor. If they can't make the appointment for two weeks, they go without their medication altogether until they see the doctor. And the next month the problem

potentially begins all over again with a different doctor for another medication since they refill at various times throughout the year. And the cycle continues.

## **Rewards for Seniors**

***Now the good news!*** Technology and innovation have created solutions to all the risk factors listed above. Clearly, many caregivers and seniors need access to “medication management” that reduces these risks and improves the clinical outcomes of those taking multiple medications. Remember the “quarterback” analogy? Now you can get a team of healthcare professionals to manage your medications and chronic conditions that’s available 24/7.

- **Personal Care Team** – Seniors today can access healthcare professionals who specialize in managing all their medication and creating a personalized treatment plan that reflects their lifestyle and habits. *Healthcare is personal* so why not have a specific treatment plan that provides on-going support, catering to an individual and their personal preferences? *The Care Team oversees all prescription medications and chronic conditions providing a holistic view of each patient’s overall condition. This approach personalizes their healthcare making it far more probable that patients will comply favorably to treatment regimens.*
- **Education** – If seniors understand why they’ve been prescribed a certain medication, they have a far better appreciation for the importance of taking it. Understanding their chronic disease(s) empowers the patient to become an active participant in their treatment. Educating seniors through a personal care team on a regular basis is key to drastically improving adherence and a better quality of life.
- **Reduce Confusion** – The best way to reduce confusion is to eliminate having to organize and sort out medication in the first place. Monthly pre-packaging of medication is available so seniors never have to wonder when or what pills to take. It’s already done for them in daily dose packs in the shape of a calendar (am and pm) for easy understanding. Hand packaged by their personal pharmacist, the senior has the safety and security of knowing their medication was packaged for them just like their doctor prescribed and in accordance to their lifestyle, habits and preferences.
- **Benefits of Pre-Packaging** – Because a pharmacist does the pre-packaging, drugs that may cause adverse reactions are virtually eliminated. The pharmacist dispenses and

packages medications prescribed from all physicians (prescriptions and over-the-counter) so a “quarterback” sees the big picture and eliminates adverse reactions between drugs. Also, the pharmacist can help eliminate duplicate medications prescribed by different doctors, often resulting in less cost to the patient. Over-medication is a real problem – both physically and financially. With the cost of drugs these days, eliminating those that aren’t needed helps seniors feel better and save money!

- **No More Missing Refills** – Part of the medication management program is to synchronize all prescriptions from each doctor so they can be refilled at the same time. This eliminates several different medications needing refills at various times throughout the year. The care team and pharmacist works with each doctor’s office to line up all prescriptions so they can be refilled without missing any medication.
- **Free Home Delivery** – The Pre-Packaging is a great solution to eliminating many problems. Most firms who specialize in medication management offer free home delivery - in calendar shaped pre-packaged, daily dosage kits for easy use. Not only does it show up on the doorstep at the appropriate time but it also eliminates multiple trips to the local pharmacy each month.
- **Feel Better, Get Better, Stay Better** – Seniors who have experienced the care team approach and medication management typically have far better clinical outcomes than those who don’t. Having a care team as a quarterback who sees the big picture is far more proactive than waiting until a problem arises that could have been prevented. These seniors experience fewer doctor visits, emergency visits and hospitalizations. They have a more productive lifestyle and typically experience an improvement in how they feel.

## **Conclusion**

Fortunately, today’s healthcare can be far more interactive, personal and convenient. We must acknowledge the potential problem of taking too much, too little or unnecessary medication. If there isn’t a healthcare professional that can see the whole picture, the patient is susceptible to unnecessary risks associated with prescription medication. The good news is, today, that no longer has to happen. Medication management is a proactive way to live a better and healthier lifestyle throughout the aging process.

About the Author:

**Jim Jones is President of Wellspring Benefits Group located in Colleyville, Texas. He is a visionary leader with an eye for emerging markets in a changing healthcare environment. Jim can be reached at [jim.jones@wellspringbenefitsgroup.com](mailto:jim.jones@wellspringbenefitsgroup.com) or view website at [AGA.ControlMyCare.com/seniors](http://AGA.ControlMyCare.com/seniors).**

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics: Data Brief #42. September, 2010

<sup>2</sup>Ira B. Wilson, MD, Cathy Schoen, MS, Patricia Neuman, Sc.D et al. Physician – Patient Communication about Prescription Medication Non-adherence: A 50-State Study of America’s Seniors., Journal of General Internal Medicine, January 2007, 22(1):6-12.

<sup>3</sup>Chisholm-Burns MA, Spivey CA. The “Cost” of medication non-adherence: consequences we cannot afford to accept. Available at: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23229971](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23229971)

<sup>4</sup>National Council on Patient Information and Education. Fact Sheet: Medicine Use and Older Adults, October 2010