

Misuse and Abuse of Medications: A Fact Sheet to Share

Over 75% of people over the age of 65 take a prescription medication. The average number of medications, including over-the-counter medications that an older adult may be using at any given time is five. Many people are not aware of the age related changes that make the human body more vulnerable to the effects of drugs and medications. As we age, our bodies experience changes that impact the absorption, processing and excretion of drugs. Given these facts and the knowledge that older adult's body systems are changing, it is easier for us to understand the ease with which an older adult can fall victim to the problems of substance misuse and abuse.

Psychoactive Drugs

Over 25% of older adults are prescribed psychoactive medications that have the potential to be misused or abused.ⁱ Psychoactive drugs are generally used to treat pain, anxiety and sleep disorders in older adults. These medications work in the central nervous system, causing changes in brain function that affect mood, cognition, behavior and consciousness, as well as the ability to perceive pain.ⁱⁱ The two most dangerous types are known as "benzodiazepines" or sedatives that treat anxiety and sleep disorders, and "opioid analgesics" that treat pain. They have high dependence and abuse potential, and are very dangerous when combined with alcohol.

Using Multiple Medications at Once

With both prescription and nonprescription medications, the side effects of one drug can be intensified by the effects of another. This is called a drug-drug interaction. Older adults are the largest population that utilize over-the-counter medications (antacids, cold medicines, laxatives, sleep aids, etc.) and nutraceuticals (herbal remedies, dietary supplements, vitamins, etc.), accounting for 30% of OTC sales. Many consider these medications to be "safe" because they aren't subject to the same FDA (Federal Drug Administration) regulations. Yet over-the-counter medications and nutraceuticals can have serious side effects and negative interactions with other drugs, just like any other medication. Some can be habit forming and others can be very dangerous for individuals with dementia or other illnesses. Doctors and pharmacists are always available to inform you of the side effects and compatibility of specific medication, whether prescription or over-the-counter. If you are planning on taking a new medication, it is important

to ensure that it is safe for you to take alongside your other medications. Make sure to read the labels or ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Misuse and Abuse of Medications

It may be difficult to tell when one is misusing or even abusing medications. Many problematic behaviors may not be noticed as abnormal. It is important that medications (including over-the-counter) only be taken in the manner and dosage that they are prescribed! Read the warning labels or talk to your doctor or pharmacist about whether the different medications you are taking are compatible and if they are safe to take when combined with alcohol.

The Following Behaviors Are Considered Misuse:

- Taking medications as prescribed but experiencing intensified side effects such as drowsiness or dizziness
- Taking medications as prescribed, unaware of the potential for dependency and then slowly taking higher doses than prescribed, leading to pain and withdrawal symptoms when the medication runs out
- Sharing medications with friends, or taking medications from other people
- Having a drink while taking a medication that is not safe with alcohol
- Using a drug for recreational purposes or to achieve a “high”

Substance Use Becomes Problematic Abuse When:

- It interferes with a person’s ability to function, perform tasks or carry out responsibilities
- Relationships are strained, disrupted or destroyed
- It causes physical, cognitive, behavioral or mood problems
- It becomes a central activity or part of a daily routine
- It distracts from reality or pain – it is used as an escape or coping mechanism
- An individual depends on the substance

Symptoms of Substance Abuse

- Bumps, bruises or falls that are unexplained or suspicious
- Slurred speech, impaired balance
- Memory loss, black outs, vague recollections
- Behavioral changes, depressed mood, anxiety, hostility
- Isolation or withdrawal
- Increased use or growing dependency on substance
- Neglect of personal appearance or care.
- Denial of a problem – this is the primary symptom of addiction

ⁱ Simoni-Wastila L, Yang HK. (2006). Psychoactive drug abuse in older adults. *American Journal of Geriatric Pharmacotherapy*, 4:380 – 394.

ⁱⁱ “Older Americans Behavioral Health Issue Brief 5: Prescription Medication Misuse and Abuse Among Older Adults” developed for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [by Johnson, Bassin & Shaw Inc., 5515 Security Lane, Rockville, MD 20852] under Contract No. HHSS2832007000031.