

Multiple Medications Increase Poisoning Risk for Seniors

Q. My 80-year-old father, who lives alone, takes a number of medications prescribed by several doctors. What are the risks and what can I do?

Your father, like other seniors who take various medications, runs an increased risk of accidental poisoning. According to the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), older patients have complex medication regimens, often involving multiple medications prescribed by several physicians that make them vulnerable to accidental poisonings.

That possibility for error makes communication vital between your dad and all of his doctors. In fact, in 2005, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations' (JCAHO) Sentinel Event Database revealed that 63 percent of the reported medication errors resulting in death or serious injury in hospitals were because of breakdowns in communication. And approximately half of those could have been avoided through effective medication reconciliation. Encourage your father to tell his doctors as well as his pharmacist about all the medications and other supplements he's taking. ASHP also recommends that seniors do the following:

Keep a list of medications. A written record of the medications, including drug name, dosage and frequency, is an important tool to have during physician visits and in case of an emergency.

Learn about medications. Ask the doctor or pharmacist to explain why the medication has been prescribed, the food and medicines that should be avoided, and possible reactions and side effects.

Use one pharmacy. Many seniors receive prescriptions from more than one doctor, making drug interactions more likely. By using one pharmacy, all prescriptions are consolidated and the pharmacist can check for possible interactions between medications.

Keep a journal. Make note of all symptoms, especially after taking medications. Painful or unexpected side effects may signal a need for adjusting the medication regimen.

Maintain a schedule. Holding to a routine can decrease the chances of missing dosages or taking more than needed.

Other medication tips and information on using medicine safely can be found on ASHP's consumer Web site, www.SafeMedication.com. (National Poison Prevention Week is March 18-24, a great time to focus on sharing tips with the older adults in your family.) Companionship also can be an important safeguard. Medication reminders are one popular and vital service that CAREGivers from Home Instead Senior Care provide to seniors. Remind your dad that a second set of eyes can add a measure of security and comfort to his life, and help him maintain his regular routine in his home for as long as possible.

By Caryn Byrd, Community Outreach at the Home Instead Senior Care office serving Orange and NE Chatham counties. For more information call (919) 933-3300 or visit www.homeinstead.com.