

Healthy Aging: Older Adults and Behavioral Health

Facts and Figures

- ✓ The average American life expectancy has risen from 47 years in 1900 to 77 years in 2000.
- ✓ Over the next 20 years, the number of adults aged 65+ will double and aged 80+ will triple.
- ✓ Over 12% of the age 60+ population live in poverty.
- ✓ Over one-third of individuals age 60+ have at least one disability.
- ✓ Late-life depression affects about 6 million Americans age 65 and older, but only 10% receive treatment.
- ✓ Older adults with depression are more likely to commit suicide than are younger people with depression. Individuals age 65 and older account for 19% of all deaths by suicide; the risk of suicide among elderly white men ages 80 to 84 is more than twice that of the general population.
- ✓ 20% of older adults experience mental health disorders that are not part of the “normal” aging process.
- ✓ The need for behavioral health treatment among older adults is projected to double by 2020.

Nearly 17% of older adults misuse or abuse prescription and/or illicit drugs.

Aging and Medications

Medication misuse in older adults frequently results from underuse, overuse, or erratic use. The risks of misuse and potential for abuse increase with age for several reasons:

Age-related changes – Changes in metabolism can have a tremendous impact on the way drugs affect an older person’s body.

Health conditions/types of medications – Older adults are more apt to have multiple chronic illnesses, see multiple doctors and take multiple medications, leading to greater chance for confusion or problems.

Complex dosage schedules – The average older adult takes 4-5 prescriptions and 2 over-the-counter medications, some of them perhaps several times a day.

Sensory problems – Poor eyesight makes prescription labels hard to read. Childproof caps make opening pill bottles so frustrating that older adults may skip dosages.

Forgetfulness – Memory lapses may lead to skipping a dose, to doubling up after missing a dose, or to taking all pills at once to alleviate having to worry about remembering.

Sharing/saving medications – Sharing pills with someone that may have a similar symptom or saving them for a potential future recurrence are common among older adults.

For older adults medication abuse is often unintended. Instances that may lead to abuse or dependency include:

- Overuse or extended use of some medications, especially pain or sleeping pills.
- Self-medicating to relieve symptoms for illnesses other than for what the medication is intended, such as anxiety disorder or depression.
- Knowingly consuming alcohol while taking medication, which may cause dangerous interactions with your medications.

Preventing Medication Misuse

Did You Know?

- **Older adults constitute nearly 13% of the population and buy 33% of all prescription drugs and 40% of all over-the-counter medicines (cold remedies, antacids, aspirin, etc.).**
- **83% of older adults take one or more medications daily, and 30% take 8 or more daily.**
- **At least 40% of older adults do not follow prescription directions.**
- **50% of all adverse medication reactions occur among older adults.**
- **Older patients average 2-3 serious medication errors per month.**
- **28% of all older adult hospitalizations result from medication problems.**

Signs to Watch For

Individuals who start acting “senile” may actually be experiencing a drug reaction or taking the wrong dose. Other signs that there may be a problem include:

- Eating or sleeping habit changes
- Irritability, sadness, depression
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Loss of coordination
- Trouble concentrating
- Unexplained chronic pain

If you or someone you know displays one or more of these signs, consult a health care professional.

Medication Do's & Don'ts

Most drug misuse by older adults is unintentional. Here are some ways to help prevent medication problems and get the best benefit from the medications prescribed:

DO communicate openly with your doctors and pharmacists to ensure that you are getting the care you deserve.

DO ask your doctor about any new prescriptions and make sure you understand all the instructions BEFORE taking them. Read labels carefully. Find out about possible side effects and report any that occur to your doctor immediately.

DO establish a routine to avoid forgetting taking medication and a method for organizing your medications, such as a daily or weekly pillbox.

DO keep an updated list of all the medications you take — prescription, over-the-counter, herbal remedies, vitamins, dietary supplements, etc.

DO share the list with each doctor and pharmacist at every visit; tell them about ALL of the different medicines you are taking, as well as those you are sensitive or allergic to.

DO request a review of the list of your prescriptions at your local pharmacy to avoid the potential for negative side effects

DON'T take more or less than the prescribed amount.

DON'T stop taking a medication suddenly without first checking with your doctor.

DON'T take medications prescribed for someone else or give yours to others.

DON'T keep old or expired medications in your medicine cabinet.

Each day millions of elderly people take their prescription medications. These medications provide any number of benefits to each individual whether they regulate blood pressure, ease pain, treat infections, or control glucose levels - each day they save lives. Often these medications have countless benefits that allow people to live lives that would not otherwise be possible. Unfortunately, these same medications can also take lives. I'm not talking about times when the medications are at fault, but rather the times when an individual abuses his/her prescription medication, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Cheri Walter, OACBHA News, March 2008

Source: Adapted from information available from the Older Ohioans Behavioral Health Network, operated by the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Association (OACBHA), including the following publications: "Healthy Aging: Preventing Medication Misuse" brochure; "Treatment Works; People Recover...Regardless of Age" Fact Sheet on Older Adults. This and other information can be accessed via <http://oacbha.org/programs/older-ohioans-behavioral-health-network/>