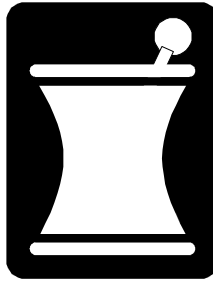


MEDICATION USE



Increase Safety, Decrease Risk

The following are commonly used prescription drugs and the particular risks involved for the elderly person.

DIURETICS or "water pills" are given to decrease the workload of the heart by reducing edema (fluid retention). Decreasing the amount of extra fluid in the body can also reduce the blood pressure. However, diuretics can produce imbalance in the body. If too much fluid is removed too quickly, the elderly person may become dehydrated. The blood levels of sodium and potassium (electrolytes) may also be affected, causing irregular rhythms of the heart, fatigue, and confusion. Although the diuretics may be necessary for the person, an intermittent schedule (taking the medication every other day or three times a week) may adequately control the excess fluid without causing as many side effects.

ANTI-HYPERTENSIVES are medications that lower blood pressure (BP) and hopefully reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke. One of the problems with BP medication is that it can cause a rapid drop in pressure especially when the person goes from a lying or sitting position to a standing position (orthostatic hypotension). The risk of a fall and resultant injury is great. Therefore position changes should be made slowly (sit on the edge of the bed for a minute before standing).

Some anti-hypertensives may also cause depression. The depression can mimic symptoms of a worsening dementia. Depression has been linked to the use of such anti-hypertensives as Aldomet, Reserpine and Inderal.

Weight loss and dietary restriction of salt can also lower an elevated BP. These methods may meet with more resistance than taking a pill, but they have the advantage of fewer effects!

DIGOXIN (Lanoxin) is frequently used for the older person to strengthen the contraction of the heart and reduce the heart rate. Unfortunately there is a narrow range between what is therapeutic or helpful and what is toxic or harmful. There is

a blood test to monitor the levels of digoxin in the body. IT is helpful because the symptoms indicating toxicity can be very vague (fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, and headache). The person may also become confused or depressed. He or she may develop an irregular heart rhythm especially a slowing of the heart rate. If a person's pulse is below 60 beats per minute the digoxin should be held until you speak with a physician. As with the diuretics, the individual may do very well with less of the drug, (reduce the amount and/or the number of days per week it is taken).

PSYCHOTROPIC drugs, those that can alter mood, can produce a wide variety of adverse effects. These drugs may be given to relieve depression (antidepressants) or to reduce agitation and difficult behavior (Haldol).

Many of the psychotropic drugs can produce sedation and the person may be napping a great deal during the day. Wakefulness, confusion, and irritability may occur at night.

Confusion can be extremely significant problem for the older person. He or she may become disoriented, assaultive, and experience visual hallucinations and memory loss. When confused, medications and food may be forgotten.

The heart and blood vessels are also affected by psychotropic medications. Heart rate may increase and the rhythm of the heart can become irregular. A decrease in blood pressure with a change of position (as with the anti-hypertensives) can also be a danger to the person taking these drugs.

Both psychotropic medications and those used to treat Parkinson's can cause anticholinergic problems. These include constipation, confusion, and retention of urine. When an elderly man has an enlarged prostate, the urine retention becomes even more problematical. When urine sits in the bladder, the chance of an infection developing is increased. The older person may also experience a decrease in production of saliva in the mouth. This can interfere with taste and digestion of food.

Patients and families cannot over-emphasize the importance of taking an up-to-date medication list to every doctor appointment. Prescription medications, used wisely can enhance the quality of life. Many side effects can be eliminated or controlled by appropriate medication adjustment.

