

5 (More) Quick Safety Tips to Manage Your Medications

By Johanna Trimble and Janet Currie



Deprescribing means reducing or stopping medications that may not be beneficial or may be causing harm. The goal of deprescribing is to maintain or improve quality of life.

Always consult your doctor before stopping, changing or starting a drug.

1. Ask for a medication review. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to review all your medications, especially if you are taking several or if different doctors prescribed them. This means reviewing your complete medication list to make sure all are needed and not causing problems as you grow older. List drugs prescribed by specialists and over the counter drugs too. Often, doctors are able to give you an appointment that is longer than the usual 10 minutes to have a consultation about your medications. It is up to you to ask for a review of your medication: don't assume that your drugs will be reviewed on an annual basis. Remember to ask your doctor if you can either stop taking some medications or lower the doses of others as a result of the medication review.

2. Medication issues in nursing home settings need to be addressed quickly. In a nursing home setting, get answers quickly if you have concerns about your medications or a family member's. Patients can lose function and mobility if bedridden from a drug interaction. Delirium (a reversible state of disorientation, agitation or drowsiness) or unusual behavior can be caused by medications and it may be mistaken for a serious



chronic illness such as dementia. Alert your family members and be prepared to go, with your family, to management if you have serious concerns or can't get an answer. If you feel anxious bringing up medication issues, ask a family member to make an appointment with nursing home staff and have them accompany you.



3. Avoid anticholinergic drugs.

Older adults are often prescribed anticholinergic medications (medicines that affect acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter) for common conditions such as overactive bladder, allergies, gastrointestinal problems, Parkinson's and depression. Seniors are highly sensitive to the harmful effects of anticholinergic drugs. These drugs can have a negative impact on the brain by causing delirium, confusion and memory problems as well as physical effects such as dry mouth, constipation and blurred vision. Recent research is exploring whether these drugs have a role in dementia. While this link is still being explored, seniors should avoid these drugs whenever possible or ask for a safer alternative.

4. Ask questions and be wary. When your doctor suggests a new drug, you have the right to ask what the drug is for, what its benefits are and the risks of harm. Is the drug being prescribed for prevention? How likely is it that you would become ill in the future if you didn't take it? Could the side effects outweigh any benefit the drug may have? It may not be worthwhile feeling unwell every day because of a drug to gain a small chance of having a little less risk of future illness.

5. Ask if deprescribing is appropriate for you. If a drug is bothering you, ask your doctor or pharmacist about the possibility of a "drug holiday" or a trial of stopping or tapering the drug and carefully monitoring the results. It is reasonable to see if a drug is causing problems if it is not a life-saving drug. You may find more information here:

deprescribingnetwork.ca/starting-a-conversation

Learn more about managing medications by visiting this website:

deprescribingnetwork.ca

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Janet Currie is a social worker who has been involved with patient and medication safety issues for over 17 years. She is particularly concerned about the safety and efficacy of psychiatric drugs and their impacts on seniors. She is a member of the core Executive of the Canadian Deprescribing Network, the past co-chair of the Canadian Women's Health Network and was a two-term member of Health Canada's Expert Advisory Committee on the Vigilance of Health Products. She owns and manages a website on psychiatric drug safety and has frequently testified to the Canadian Senate and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health on prescription drug surveillance and adverse drug effects. She is completing a PhD on medication safety and off-label prescribing at UBC. Janet is Chair of the Public Awareness Committee of the Canadian Medication Appropriateness and Deprescribing Network.