

Medications and Memory

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Have you ever forgotten where you parked your car, put your keys, or someone's name?

Some medications can contribute to these lapses!

This article presents examples of medications that can affect the brain and some questions to ask your health professional.



Did you know? Some medications have shown to impact memory and brain function, either when used alone or in combination with other medications.

By causing **drowsiness, confusion**, and a **loss of balance**, medications may interfere with attention, memory, language, task planning and execution, or other cognitive faculties. These side effects may be temporary or long-term.

Older adults are particularly at risk of suffering from these side effects. As we age, our body becomes more sensitive to them, including side effects affecting the brain. **Individuals who have a diagnosis of cognitive impairment or dementia are also at risk.** They should avoid taking medications that could worsen their cognition, especially when a safer and more effective alternative is available.

Which medications affect memory and brain function? Take a look at the table below to see if you or someone you know are taking medication that can negatively affect the brain. Please note that medications other than those listed may also impact function and memory.

Examples of medications that can affect cognition and memory

Medication Classes	Examples of medications	Common uses
Sleeping pills	Benzodiazepines lorazepam (Ativan®), oxazepam (Serax®), diazepam (Valium®)	These medications are generally prescribed to people who have trouble sleeping.
	Non-benzodiazepine sedatives or “z-drugs” zopiclone (Imovane®), zolpidem (Sublinox®)	
Over-the-counter sleeping aids	diphenhydramine (Unisom®, ZzzQuil®, Tylenol Nighttime®, Advil Nighttime®)	These medications are available without a prescription and are generally taken for insomnia (trouble sleeping)
Some anti-allergy medications	hydroxyzine (Atarax®), diphenhydramine (Benadryl®)	These medications are generally used to treat itchy skin allergies. More rarely, they are used to treat insomnia or anxiety
Some anti-nausea medications	dimenhydrinate (Gravol®)	These medications are often used to treat motion sickness when travelling.
Antipsychotics	quetiapine (Seroquel®), risperidone (Risperdal®)	These medications are used to treat certain types of mental health problems, such as schizophrenia. However, these medications are often prescribed “off-label” for sleep or anxiety, or to treat behavioural symptoms of Alzheimer's disease or other dementias

Examples of medications that can affect cognition and memory (continued)

Medication Classes	Examples of medications	Common uses
Some antidepressants	amitriptyline (Elavil®), nortriptyline (Aventyl®), paroxetine (Paxil®)	Although these medications are called antidepressants, they are prescribed for a number of reasons, including for sleep, the prevention of migraines, the treatment of pain or depression.
Medications for urinary incontinence	oxybutynin (Ditropan®)	These medications may be prescribed to treat overactive bladder (a condition where a person has sudden urges to urinate).
Muscle relaxants	cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril®), methocarbamol (Robaxin®), Robaxacet®, Robax Platinum®)	These medications are generally used to treat spasms, and neck or back pain.
Opioid (narcotic) medications	codeine (Tylenol NO. 3®), morphine (Statex®), hydromorphone (Dilaudid®), oxycodone (Percocet®)	These medications may be prescribed for acute pain (e.g., short term pain after surgery), as well as chronic pain.
Medications to treat nerve pain or epilepsy	pregabalin (Lyrica®), gabapentin (Neurontin®)	These medications may be prescribed for a number of conditions, including nerve pain caused by diabetes or shingles.

What Can You Do?

Here are a few things you can do to make sure your medications aren't harming your memory or cognition:

- **Ask for a medication review:** speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist and request a full review of your medication. Together, you will assess if any of them may be affecting your memory or cognition. Remember to always bring a complete list of your medications with you to this appointment.
- **Ask about *deprescribing*:** Deprescribing means stopping or reducing the dose of a medication that may no longer be necessary or may be causing harm. Ask your health professional : “If a medication may be affecting my memory or cognition, could it be deprescribed?”

Here are five questions you can ask your health professional when reviewing your medications:

5 questions to ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about your medications:

1. Why am I taking this medication?
2. What are the potential benefits and harms of this medication?
3. Can it affect my memory or cause me to fall?
4. Can I stop or reduce the dose of this medication (i.e. deprescribing)?
5. Who do I follow-up with and when?

Always talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before stopping or changing any of your medications.

References

1. Ruscin JM, Linnebur SA. Vieillesse et médicaments - La Santé des personnes âgées [Internet]. Manuels Merck; 2023 [cited 2024 Jan 11].
2. AGS Beers Criteria Update Expert Panel. American Geriatrics Society 2023 updated AGS Beers Criteria for potentially inappropriate medication use in older adults [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2024 Jan 15].

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