

Drugs and seniors

The way people use drugs tends to change as they age. Older adults are less likely than younger people to drink, smoke, or use illicit drugs like marijuana. On the other hand, because they are more likely to get sick or to have chronic health problems, they are more likely to use medications. They consume more over-the-counter drugs and drugs prescribed by their doctors than younger people do. This is one reason why seniors are more likely to suffer from the side effects of medications.

Medications can affect the way people think, move, or feel. People can get drowsy, forgetful, anxious or depressed. They may have headaches, or trouble sleeping. When an older person has these symptoms, it's easy to assume that they are just signs of aging. It's important to know that they could be the side effects of the medications that person is taking.

When you combine more than one medication, or combine medications and alcohol, the chances that you will suffer side effects are even greater.

The body changes as people get older. As they age, most people have slower organ function, slower blood circulation, and more body fat. These all allow drugs to stay in the body longer, and again increase the chances of side effects.

Medications can also cause problems when they are not taken properly. Anyone who is taking several drugs, or is having trouble with memory, may forget when or whether they took their last dose of a particular medication. If you have trouble with this, try using a drug organizer: a pill container that has a separate pocket for each day of the week. For seniors with poor eyesight, the print on prescription labels or on the package of an over-the-counter drug might be too small to read.

If this is a problem for you, ask your doctor or pharmacist for a large-print label or for clear instructions about taking a particular drug.

Problems arise also when people share drugs with others, reuse old medications, or get several prescriptions from different doctors. Prescription drugs should only be taken by the person for whom they were prescribed, and taken only as long as the doctor recommends. Old drugs can spoil, lose their effects or even become more potent. If several doctors are prescribing for you, you may get too much of one drug, or you may end up taking two or more drugs that are dangerous when combined.

Some seniors have emotional reasons for using more medications. They may have trouble getting used to retirement. They may be lonely and facing the deaths of people who are close to them. They may come to rely on medications to help them cope with stress or loss. Some of these medications cause physical dependence, or addiction.

If you want to avoid the side effects of medications, and avoid becoming dependent on them, try using other remedies. Regular bedtimes, relaxation, eating well, and exercise can reduce anxiety and help you sleep.

Medications are necessary in some cases, and they are best used only when necessary. Before using any drug, ask yourself the following questions.

- Why am I taking this drug?
- Is it really necessary to take this drug?
- How and when should I take this drug?
- What are the side effects?
- What are the interactions with other drugs? With alcohol?
- How long do I need to take this drug?

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.