

HOW TO HELP YOUR SENIOR MANAGE MEDICATION

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS: EDUCATION FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER®



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SENIOR CARE®
To us, it's personal.

Modern medicine continues to give us new drugs to ease our pain, cure our ills and extend our lives. Advances seem to happen every day and as a result we see ads on TV, in newspapers and online touting the benefits of some new drug.

Medical advancements are terrific, but as our parents age and the number of their potential health issues increase, it may mean that doctors prescribe them more and more medicines. Plus with the holistic health movement, many seniors are using non-medicinal supplements to improve their overall health.

Because of the volume of medicines and supplements they may be taking, many seniors find that they have problems keeping their medication regiment straight. They may take too much, too little, take it at the wrong time of day, or not at all.

As caregivers, we have to be extra diligent about helping our senior loved ones manage their medications. In this workshop, we'll discuss senior medication challenges and then provide tips on how to help your senior organize and manage their medications.

SENIOR MEDICATION CHALLENGES

Managing multiple medications is a challenge for many seniors. The results of one survey revealed that:

- More than half of the seniors polled said they took at least five different prescription drugs regularly.
- About 25% of the seniors took between 10 and 19 pills each day.
- Nearly three in five admitted that they forget to take their medications.
- Among those using five or more medications, 63% said they forgot doses, compared to 51% among people who took fewer medications.

Source: Medco Health Solutions survey released in December 2009.

Senior medication challenges include:

- **Remembering to take medication.** If your parent is taking multiple medications or has frequent changes in prescriptions or dosages, it can lead to confusion and may cause them to miss taking certain medications.
- **Getting timely refills.** This can be a challenge if your parent is hard of hearing. If his or her pharmacy uses automated voice prompts it may be difficult for them to understand so they might just avoid calling altogether.

Getting prescriptions refills can also be a problem if your senior loved one no longer drives. Many seniors don't want to be a burden to their family and friends so they may not ask for help to run an errand to the pharmacy in order to get their refills.

Did you know...?

More than 80% of adults aged 57 and older take at least one prescription drug a day and about half regularly mix drugs with over-the-counter medications and supplements. One in 25 older adults may experience a major drug interaction.

Source: www.Care.com

- **Adverse effects, side effects and drug interactions.** An *adverse effect* is harmful or unwanted result caused by a medication. Some adverse effects are temporary and only occur when starting, increasing or discontinuing a treatment, such as nausea, constipation or sleepiness. The problem with adverse effects is if your senior decides the symptom is too troublesome, they may stop taking their medication regimen altogether, which could result in another more serious medical problem.

A *side effect* is an unintended result of a medication. Some side effects can be beneficial, such as weight loss, but normally when doctors talk about side effects they mean adverse effects, as described above.

Drug interaction means the medication may interact adversely with another medication, food or beverage. Alcohol is commonly listed as an item to avoid while taking certain medications. However other items, such as dairy products and even grapefruit juice, can cause harmful interactions.

Tip

Carefully read the material that comes with each and every prescription to help your parent avoid interactions and understand what is a normal or expected side effect.

- **Fear of asking questions.** Many seniors don't want to appear silly or uneducated so instead of asking the doctor or pharmacist for clarification or inquiring if a reaction is normal or not, they just stay silent. Not having these conversations could result in higher risk of treatment failure or more serious adverse effects.
- **The high cost of medication.** High costs for prescription drugs can lead to two additional challenges. The first is not taking medications at the required dose or at all because they are deemed too expensive – and this can lead to treatment failure.

The second challenge is that to avoid costs, many insurance companies require doctors to prescribe the generic brand of a drug. While generics are often equivalent at a much lower cost; the chemistry of the drug may not have the same effect as the regular brand and your parent might not get the same medicinal benefits they once had.

- **Not taking medication in the proper way.** One example of this is chewing non-chewables. Some medications should never be chewed or crushed as this may change how they're absorbed in the body. Some medications shouldn't be cut because they're coated to be long acting or to protect the stomach. Also, if your parent has a liquid medication, make sure that they use the cup or spoon that came with it in order to avoid dosing errors.

Did you know...?

Multiple medication use is taking its toll on the financial health of America's seniors. The ability to afford their drugs is the top concern among 40% of those taking five or more prescription medications daily, followed by worries about side effects and interactions.

Source:

Medco Health Solutions survey

Notes:

USEFUL TIPS FOR MANAGING MEDICATIONS

Here are some ways to help your parents organize their medications and avoid drug interactions.

- 1. Create a list of all the prescription medications your loved one is taking.** Each parent should have his or her own list. At the top, put their full name and date of birth, then list each drug name and its dosage. Include any special directions, such as how many times a day and when the medication should be taken, and what liquids or foods should be used to take with the medication. Also include any foods or beverages that should be avoided, like dairy or alcohol. This part of the list should also include refill frequency.

Add any over-the-counter medicines and supplements to the list, such as calcium, vitamins and herbs. Next, add allergies including those related to medicines and foods. The last items on the list should be pharmacy and health care provider names, addresses, telephone numbers and family emergency contact information.

This list should be readily available for emergency responders so it's wise to leave a copy on your parent's refrigerator – they are trained to look there for just such information.

Your parents should take the list with them to any medical appointment or when filling a new prescription. Also, one or two family members should have copies and be responsible for updates as necessary.

- 2. Consolidate prescriptions at one pharmacy.** One of the medication management challenges for seniors is getting timely refills. If you discover that your parent has prescriptions at multiple pharmacies, work with them to consolidate all prescriptions into one location. Not only will that make it easier on your senior loved one, but the pharmacist will have the full list of drugs being taken and can better watch for potential harmful interactions.
- 3. Consider mail order prescriptions.** If it's difficult for your senior loved one to get to the pharmacy or they have problems hearing and can't manage the telephone voice system, mail order prescriptions, especially for drugs taken every day over a period of time, might be a great solution. There are usually cost savings associated with this method as well. In addition, you could volunteer to manage the refills via email so your loved one doesn't have to worry about it.

Even if your senior is using a mail order pharmacy, it's wise to periodically consult a pharmacist. He or she can help you ensure that the medications your parent is taking aren't interacting with each other. You can also share a list of over-the-counter drugs and supplements to make sure those won't have any adverse effects when combined with the prescription.

- 4. Save all information materials that come with a new prescription.** If you or your parent starts noticing a new issue, such as a memory problem, you can check the reference material to see if the new medication might be causing the problem. This may also be a good time to remind them not to cut or chew tablets unless specifically directed to do so.
- 5. Set up an organizing system.** Perhaps one of the most helpful tools you can offer your parent when managing medications is an effective organizing system. One of the most common methods is to use a daily pill organizer. These handy plastic organizers can be found at most drug stores and come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The most common ones usually have seven compartments – one for each day's worth of medication. Some have more compartments for each day so that your senior loved one knows what pills to take in the morning, at lunch, and with dinner or before bedtime.

If your senior loved one has a hard time even remembering to take their medications there are electronic pill organizers that will sound an alarm at the appropriate time. Other electronic pill reminders "talk," relaying information verbally, which can be also very helpful.

No matter what kind of pill organizer your senior uses, you can help by sitting down with them once a week and filling up each compartment for them. The list you made of all the medications and supplements can serve as a handy reference guide for accomplishing this task.

- 6. **Keep medications with the original container.** Whether your parent uses a pill organizer or not, it's important to keep the balance of all of their medicines in the original container. The labels contain important information such as dosage and expiration date. Speaking of expiration dates, it's a good idea for you to check the prescription labels on their pill bottles. This is a way to help make sure they are getting proper refills and you can check the expiration date and discard any old medications.
- 7. **Have open conversations with your parents about their medicines.** Encourage them to do the same with their healthcare providers and pharmacists. In the end, by speaking up and talking about proper dosage, refills and adverse effects, you will be protecting the health of your senior loved one.

Notes:

TAKING ACTION

Many seniors find that they have problems keeping their medication regiment straight, which can cause adverse effects or drug interactions. In the end, having a conversation with your parents about medicines and being engaged in their healthcare means a better quality and healthier life for them.

Think about your next steps, and how you can create your own action plan:

- 1. Resources I need to search, talk to, or meet with to learn more about medication challenges for seniors are:
- 2. The things I can do to help my loved one manage their medications more effectively are:

Action Plan:
