

Patient Talk!



The International Council of Nurses
Informed Patient Project

Safe Medication Use and Older Adults

Did you know that by the middle of this century there will be more older than younger people in the world?¹ Indeed worldwide, the population age 60 and older is increasing faster than any other age group. This large and growing number of older adults presents a number of challenges. Key among them: safe medication use.

❑ Why is this a concern?

In general, we tend to increase our use and number of medications as we move into older adulthood. In many cases, medications allow illnesses to be treated or delayed without the need of more invasive procedures such as surgery. They may also delay and treat chronic diseases, ease pain and improve overall quality of life. Despite these potential benefits, however, increased medication use raises the risk that medicine-related problems will occur. Problems include everything from minor physical discomfort to serious illness and costly hospitalisation.

❑ Why do problems occur?

Medicine-related problems may occur for a number of reasons. Your safety is at risk, for example, when medications are not regulated properly, are subject to errors or adverse events, or when you fail to take them appropriately.

In general, government bodies register medications to ensure they are safe and of acceptable quality. Serious problems can

¹ Deutsche Welle. *World Assembly on Ageing II: Growing Towards a Demographic Disaster*. 10 April 2002, www.globalaging.org/waa2/articles/demogdisaster.htm.

occur when the source and content of medicines are unknown and when medicines are distributed and sold without proper regulation – at outdoor markets, for example.

Even when medications go through the proper regulatory process, mistakes or adverse events can occur at the time they are prescribed, dispensed or administered. For instance, errors may be the result of unreadable handwriting, dosage miscalculations, poor communication among health professionals, improper product labelling, unclear instructions, or lack of patient education.

Problems can also occur when patients do not follow or simply cannot read the instructions provided. Likewise, combining ‘self-treatment’ with medications recommended by a health care professional can have negative health consequences. Self-treatment items might include over-the-counter medications and herbal products.

Working with health professionals

In their varied roles, nurses, pharmacists and physicians are involved in dispensing, prescribing and administering medications. They are valuable sources of information and advice. To avoid complications with medication use, it is best to maintain an open dialogue with your health professional. Clarify instructions; be forthcoming about any self-treatment regimen you are following; and report suspected medication errors immediately, whether your own or those of health professionals. Knowing an error has occurred is the first step toward understanding it and taking corrective action.

All of us have a role to play in ensuring safe medication use.

Fast Fact

By 2025 there will be about 1.2 billion people age 60 or older.

Further Reading

Healthy Ageing, ICN *Patient Talk!* Fact Sheet, www.patienttalk.info/FactSheets.htm

Medication Safety, ICN *Patient Talk!* Fact Sheet, www.patienttalk.info/FactSheets.htm