

Medication and Alcohol Issues Among Older Adults

Pharmacy technicians are front-line pharmacy practice workers and are in a powerful position to help prevent and identify the misuse and abuse of medications and alcohol among older adults. You may be the first to notice changes in the behavior of your regular patients. You can help by sharing your concerns with the pharmacist on duty. As part of the health care team, pharmacists can provide information to their patients to help them stay healthy. The patient's physician should be contacted if any problems are suspected.

CONSIDER THESE STATISTICS:

- One in eight Americans is 65 or older.¹
- Forty percent of American adults over age 65 take 5 or more different medications per week.² An increase in the number of medications used per week leads to an increased risk for drug-drug interactions and medication misuse and abuse.
- Alcohol and prescription drug problems affect up to 17% of older Americans.³
- Up to 50% of all prescriptions are not taken according to the physician's directions.⁴

WHAT OLDER ADULTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MEDICATIONS AND ALCOHOL

- Medications should be taken only as directed and any adverse effects should be discussed with a pharmacist or other health care professional.
- Alcohol may interact with some medications. Alcohol use should be discussed with a health care professional.
- Even small amounts of alcohol may worsen some health conditions.

MAXIMUM RECOMMENDED DRINKING LIMITS FOR OLDER ADULTS (Based on average body size; limits are less for individuals with less body mass)

MEN 65+ YEARS OF AGE:

No more than one drink per day

WOMEN 65+ YEARS OF AGE:

Less than one drink per day

A STANDARD DRINK IS:

- One can (12 oz.) beer or ale
- One glass (5 oz.) wine
- One single shot (1.5 oz.) hard liquor
- One small glass (4 oz.) sherry, liqueur, or aperitif

WHAT PHARMACY TECHNICIANS NEED TO KNOW

MEDICATIONS

- Older adults can feel the effects of medications more than younger adults do.
- Some prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, and supplements, like vitamins and herbs, can interact with one another.
- Some older adults take their medications in the wrong way, which can be harmful. They may take too many, too few, or forget to take them at all.

ALCOHOL

- Older adults can feel the effects of alcohol more than younger adults do.
- Alcohol may interact with some prescription and over-the-counter drugs and supplements.
- Alcohol may cause health problems, falls, and sleeping troubles in older adults. Alcohol may also worsen chronic health problems.
- Many older adults should never drink alcohol.
- Some older adults can drink a little sometimes. Older adults should talk to their health care providers to learn if alcohol is safe for them.

¹ Administration on Aging, 2001. www.aoa.dhhs.gov

² Kaufman DW, et al. Recent patterns of medication use in the ambulatory adult population of the United States. *JAMA* 2002; 287

³ TIP 26: *Substance Abuse Among Older Adults*, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 1998

⁴ Tommasello AC. Substance abuse and pharmacy practice: What the community pharmacist needs to know about drug abuse and dependence. *Harm Reduction Journal* 2004; 1

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COMMUNICATING WITH OLDER ADULTS

- Show courteous attention and demonstrate interest in what they are saying. Maintain proper eye contact.
- Address the patient according to his/her preference, such as Mr., Mrs., or by first name, as a sign of respect. Avoid terms such as “dear” or “honey.”
- Stress confidentiality to help patients speak more openly.
- Consider hearing and visual problems and language barriers. Use visual cues if possible.
- Be patient and persistent. If necessary, repeat messages to aid memory and understanding. If answers to your questions are unclear, ask the question in another way. Do not just repeat the same words or say them louder.
- If necessary, speak slowly and use clear language without being patronizing; provide information in clear segments that older adults can easily absorb.
- Ask open-ended questions that start with who, what, where, when, how, and why. They encourage patients to disclose more information because they require more than a yes or no answer.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Watch for changes in how your patients look, feel, and act.
- Do not try to diagnose a problem. Your very important role is to observe and report any concerns to the pharmacist on duty.
- The pharmacist may be able to provide the patient with information to improve the situation.
- When prescription misuse is suspected (taking too little or too much), the pharmacist may need to confirm the actual directions with the prescriber.
- The number of refills is a good indicator of non-compliance, misuse, or abuse. Whatever the reason, significantly early or late refills indicate a potentially unsafe medication practice. You can intervene by making the pharmacist aware of the situation.
- Share a copy of *Healthy Aging: Medications and Alcohol* with your patients. This brochure describes the importance of managing medications and alcohol for interactions and misuse. Order free multiple copies online at www.maclearinghouse.com.

RESOURCES FOR PHARMACY TECHNICIANS

- **Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information & Education Helpline**
800/327-5050 • www.helpline-online.com
24-hour referral information on treatment programs and support services
- **MA Executive Office of Elder Affairs**
800/AGE-INFO • www.800ageinfo.com
- **MassMedLine**
866/633-1617 • www.massmedline.com
- **Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, MA Department of Public Health**
www.mass.gov/dph/bsas/bsas.htm
- **National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information** • 800/729-6686 • www.health.org
- **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism**
www.niaaa.nih.gov
- **Administration on Aging**
202/619-0724 • www.aoa.dhhs.gov
- **Pharmacy Technician Certification Board**
www.ptcb.org

INFORMATION FOR CONSUMERS

- **Information and referrals:** Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline
800/327-5050 • www.helpline-online.com
- **Brochures:** Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse
800/952-6637 • www.maclearinghouse.com
Order copies of *Healthy Aging: Medications and Alcohol* available in English and other languages.
- **MassMedLine** • 866/633-1617 • www.massmedline.com
- **Regional Center for Poison Control and Prevention** (serving Massachusetts and Rhode Island)
800/222-1222

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