

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Polypharmacy: How Much is Too Much?

Polypharmacy is a term used to refer to the use of multiple medications by an individual. Prescription medication, over-the-counter (OTC) medication, natural health products and supplements can all contribute to the problem of polypharmacy. Unfortunately, with each medication taken, the risk of adverse drug reactions and drug interactions increases dramatically, as do the potential costs to public and private drug plans.

The elderly are at particular risk for polypharmacy. When OTC drugs and supplements are included, research has indicated that approximately 50% of those over the age of 65 take five or more medications on a regular basis. Other studies have reported patients using an average of 10 or more medications at the same time. Psychiatric patients, those seeing multiple physicians and pharmacists, and younger individuals with multiple disease states are also at risk.

It is important to remember that just because a plan member is taking multiple medications does not mean that they are being poorly treated. In fact, it is common to require multiple drugs to manage various medical conditions (e.g. two or three drugs for diabetes, another two for cholesterol, and three or four for high blood pressure).

Electronic Drug Utilization Review (DUR) can help identify potential duplication of drug therapies and warn of potential drug interaction. However, DUR provides only a guideline and is not a substitute for the professional judgement of the prescriber or pharmacist. In many cases, the use of multiple medications is entirely logical and intentional.

How can you avoid taking too many medications?

- **Know your medications.** Know the names of the medications, why they are being used, and their side effects. Always read labels and package inserts.
- **Talk to your doctor and pharmacist.** Make sure your doctor and pharmacist know all of the drugs you may be taking, including OTC drugs, dietary supplements and herbal/natural products. Do not expect a drug for every ailment, as some concerns may be better treated with non-drug measures. If you see more than one physician, make sure each knows about all of the medications you are taking. Never stop taking a medication without first talking with your physician.
- **If possible, use only one pharmacy for your medication needs.** This will make it easier to catch potential problems early, especially when it comes to non-prescription drugs (including supplements and herbals).
- **Organize.** Keep a current list of the medications you are taking, including prescribed drugs, OTCs, supplements and natural health products. Review this list regularly with your physician.
- **Dispose of any unused medications** unless otherwise directed by your physician or pharmacist.

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