

[IMAGE]

Preying on the Elderly?

More than 90% of people over age 65 may use at least one medication each week, and up to 40% may use five or more drugs per week. With so many seniors taking medications (or combinations of multiple medications), errors in prescription or administration are inevitable. Although the majority of these medication errors do not cause injury, extensive drug use by the elderly generates a significant number of deadly reactions or side-effects.

Based on data gathered over a one-year period from almost 30,000 Medicare patients ages 65 or older, potential adverse drug events (ADEs) were compiled from multiple sources: health-care provider reports; hospital discharge summaries; emergency department notes; administrative incident reports; etc. Adverse reactions occurring in the hospital setting were not evaluated in this study from the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The overall rate of adverse drug events was approximately 50 cases per 1,000 patients over one year; over a fourth of the ADEs were considered preventable. More than one-third of the reactions were deemed fatal, serious or life-threatening (an even higher percentage of these most-dangerous events - 42% - were preventable). Errors most often occurred in the prescribing or monitoring stages. Cardiovascular medications and antibiotics were not only the most-prescribed medication classes, but also the most likely to be linked to an ADE.

If these findings are generalized to all Medicare patients, nearly 2 million ADEs - a half-million of which are preventable and 180,000 of which are fatal or life-threatening - may be suffered annually in the U.S. Complicated medication regimens can confuse seniors and the family members who assist them. Also, rushed appointments with busy doctors can lead to mistakes in prescription and communication. Be absolutely certain that each and every medication you take is considered safe, especially when combined with other prescriptions. Taking the fewest drugs possible is the best way to avoid an accidental reaction.

Reference:

Gurwitz JH, Field TS, et al. Incidence and preventability of adverse drug events among older persons in the ambulatory setting. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2003;289(9), pp. 1107-1116.

More senior health information can be found at www.chiroweb.com/find/tellmeabout/senior.html.

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