



BRAIN HEALTH: **Medicine, Age, and Your Brain**

Many older adults take medicines to help control diseases like diabetes and depression, or to manage risky conditions like high blood pressure and abnormal cholesterol. While medicines can help you treat your health conditions, some can create problems for your brain. This fact sheet discusses why this happens, what groups of medicines can affect your brain, and how to get help with controlling the reactions or side effects that these medicines might cause.

WHAT HAPPENS AS I AGE?

During normal aging, older adults' bodies change in ways that affect how they process and react to medicines. Your brain's physical structure and abilities change as you age. Your circulatory and digestive systems, liver, and kidneys slow down and can affect how fast medicines enter and leave your body. Weight changes may affect how much medicine you need and how long it stays in your body. So, your body's ability to use medicines changes and so does its reactions to them.

Many older adults have health problems that require them to take more than one medicine. These medicines may interact with each other or with food, drink, vitamins, supplements, natural products, alcohol, or other existing health problems. For example, alcohol mixed with some drugs can slow you down, cause confusion, or affect the way your brain functions.

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What do doctors have to say about medicines and my brain?

In 2015, the American Geriatrics Society, whose members are doctors, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, and other healthcare professionals serving older adults, updated its list of medicines that older adults should avoid or use with caution. For example, one group of medicines blocks one of the chemicals that your brain cells use to communicate with each other. This group of medicines has “anticholinergic effects,” and may cause older adults to experience confusion, memory loss, and other cognitive problems. Some people mistake these problems for dementia. Many drugs have anticholinergic effects. Learn more at <http://www.healthinaging.org/medications-older-adults>.

You should get advice from a health care professional about your medicines, as there may be alternatives to ones that are causing problems. It is especially important to consult with your doctor before you make any changes to your medications.

WHAT TYPES OF MEDICINES MIGHT AFFECT MY BRAIN FUNCTION?

A National Academy of Medicine report describes some groups of medicines that may interfere with brain function in older adults, including cognition. Cognition means your ability to think, understand, learn, plan, and remember. These groups include some medicines that treat allergies, anxiety, colds and flu, depression, sleeping problems, and psychosis. Some of these medicines are sold over-the-counter. This means you can pick them up off the shelf without a doctor’s order (or prescription). Find a summary of the Institute of Medicine report for consumers at http://iom.nationalacademies.org/~media/Files/Report%20Files/2015/Cognitive_aging/Action%20Guide%20for%20Individuals%20and%20Families_V3.pdf.



Here are some questions you can ask your health professional:

- What is the name of this medicine and why am I taking it?
- How should I take this medicine?
- How long will this medicine take to work? When can I stop taking it?
- Does this medicine have any side effects on my body or brain and when should I call you about them?
- Could this medicine affect my brain function? How can I protect myself against this?
- Can I safely mix this medicine with the remedies, vitamins, natural products, and other drugs I take?
- Is there another drug or a non-drug treatment that might be safer or more effective for my body and brain?
- Do I still need to be on all my medicines?

Each person has a special set of health problems and needs medical advice before making any changes to medicines.

Abruptly stopping a medicine can be dangerous.

WHAT CAN I DO TO LOWER MY CHANCE OF HAVING MEDICINE-RELATED PROBLEMS?

You should regularly talk with your health care professional (doctor, pharmacist, nurse, or physician assistant) about your medicines. Tell him or her about any reactions or side effects you may have. During this talk, provide a list of your medicines, including over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, natural products, and supplements. Your professional needs to know everything you take in order to help you get the best treatment and avoid medicines that can affect your cognition.

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HOW DO I GET MORE INFORMATION?

For free resources on medicines and older adults, please see the following websites:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Older Adults and Adverse Drug Events

<http://www.cdc.gov/MedicationSafety/AdultAdverseDrugEvents.html>

Food and Drug Administration

Medicines and You: A Guide for Older Adults

<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/ucm163959.htm>

Institute for Safe Medication Practices

<http://www.ismp.org>

National Institutes of Health

Medicines: Use Them Safely

English:

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/medicines>

Spanish:

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/espanol/publicaciones/medicamentos>