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Managing MEDICATIONS

BY DAVID GOODMAN AND FRANK ESPOSITO

Properly

SENIOR MOMENTS

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon and John Connors was about to turn the football game on when the phone rang. He picked it up to hear his 83-year-old mother Louise speaking incoherently, slurring her words and talking gibberish.

John immediately called 911 to have an ambulance sent to his mother's house and raced to the local hospital emergency department to meet it. At first, doctors thought Louise had suffered a stroke, until further tests ruled it out. A neurologist then diagnosed her with Alzheimer's disease or possibly Pick's disease, another form of dementia.

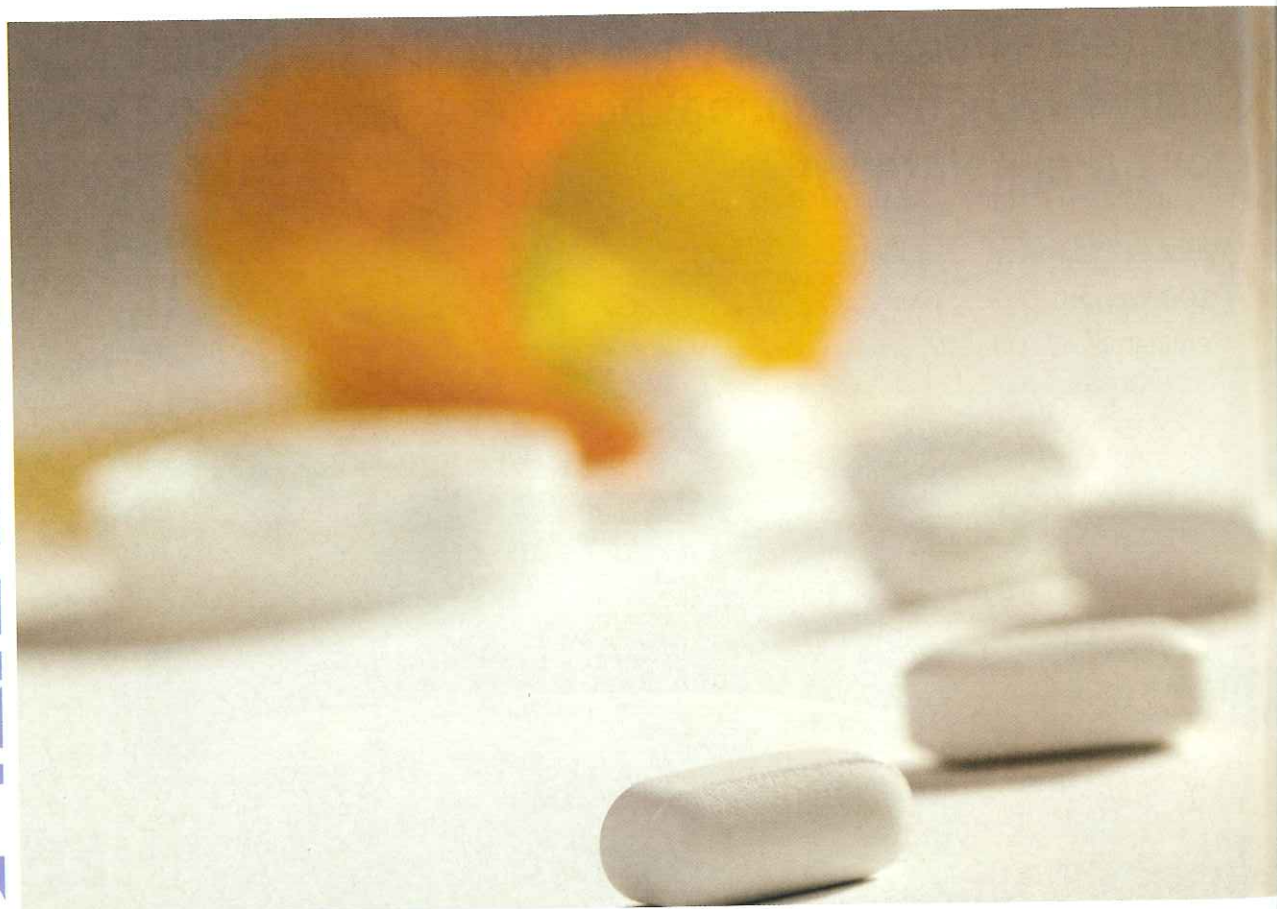
Connors, who had spent the pre-

vious weekend with his mother, found this difficult to believe. At that time, she had appeared very lucid, showing no sign of dementia. As a result of the diagnosis, he immediately scheduled an appointment with a geriatrician. This doctor read the problem quite differently: Louise, he discovered, didn't have dementia, but rather had suffered an adverse

affect from her medication.

Louise's case is hardly unique. It is estimated that 38 million older Americans suffer drug complications every year, about 180,000 which are life-threatening. They can appear as other problems common to seniors; result in dizziness, blurred vision or other symptoms that can make them prone to falls and accidents; or cause other serious side effects.

Part of the problem involves the common myths many consumers share about medication use. For example, there are still those who believe that:





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- If one dose makes me feel good, a larger dose will make me feel even better.
- If one drug does not work, I should take two or three.
- If I can buy it over the counter, it must be safe.
- If my physician has not stopped the medication, I can still use it.
- If it helped my friend, it will help me.

A SENIOR PROBLEM

The fact that seniors are most prone to medication problems is not surprising when you consider that seniors have more chronic diseases and multiple conditions—77% of those between 65 and 79 suffer from one or more chronic diseases, as do 85% of those over 80. As a result, the average senior between ages 65 and 69 fills 13.6 prescriptions per year and those between 80 and 84 old have 18.2 prescriptions filled annually. In addition, many also see multiple physicians for their various ailments.

Couple this with the physiological changes of aging, which alter the way a

body processes and reacts to certain medications and you can see the potential for disaster. For example, the liver and kidneys do not metabolize medications as easily and changes in the distribution of fat and muscle can make seniors more susceptible to adverse drug events.

Further compounding this problem is an economic reality: many seniors may not be taking the medications they need because they cannot afford them. In addition to the fact that many seniors live on fixed incomes, they spend nearly four times as much on prescription medications than those under age 65.

The biggest medication problems involve:

- Not taking medicine correctly—either forgetting to take it or failing to follow instructions;
- Allergic reactions;
- Drug side effects;
- Drug interactions;
- Duplication;
- Wrong dosage; and
- Unnecessary or inappropriate usage.

Common drug-to-drug interactions include aspirin with a blood thinner, like Coumadin, or certain diabetic medications; antacids with heart and blood pressure medications; and antihistamines with anti-depressants. There can also be problems when certain medications are taken with such common foods as dairy products, caffeine, fruit juices, and alcohol, or with herbal supplements like ginkgo biloba or kava kava.

The potential for drug contraindications has only been exacerbated further with the increased purchase of medication and supplements over the Internet. Experts urge that consumers stay away from purchasing medications that are not FDA-approved (i.e. vitamins and supplements), to avoid sites that do not require a written prescription, and to resist claims of “new cures” or “amazing results.”

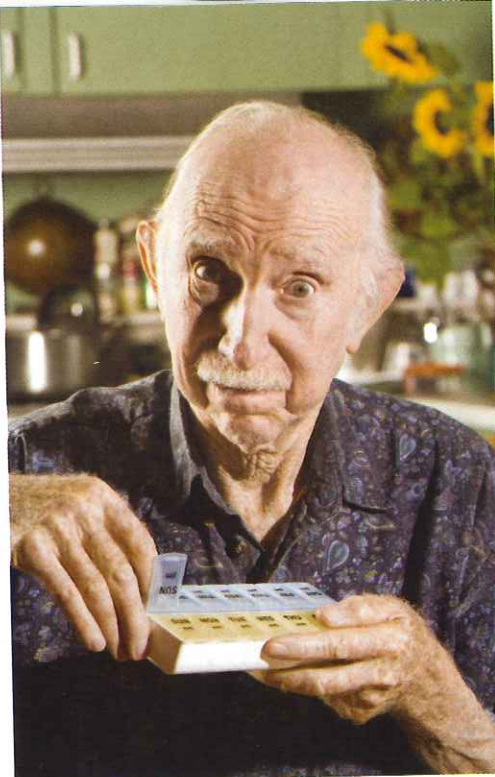
MEDICATION MANAGEMENT

By following certain protocols, seniors and their family caregivers can manage their use of medication more effectively.

Experts offer these recommendations:

- Toss any expired or discontinued prescription medications.
- Only use medications that have been prescribed for you.
- Drink a full glass of water and do not lie down for 30 minutes after taking medication.
- Have all prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy.
- Check the label when you get a prescription to verify that you're receiving the proper medication. If possible, read back the prescription to your pharmacist or health care provider.
- Read the patient information sheet that accompanies the medication. If you do not receive an information sheet, request it from your pharmacist.
- When possible, keep all medications in their original containers to avoid confusion.

Know what to do if you miss a dose, and



always contact your health care provider or pharmacist if you have any doubts.

Should there be a change in the color, size, shape, or smell of your medication when it is refilled, notify your pharmacist immediately.

Do not share or take another person's medications.

Do not take any over-the-counter drugs without first consulting your physician or pharmacist.

Look for single ingredient products.

Immediately contact your primary care provider or pharmacy if you notice any problems with taking your medicines.

When in the hospital, state your name before taking any medications and always show your wrist bracelet for identification to the person who is administering your medication. Ask the nurse or physician to identify each medication by

name before you take it. If your medication has not been given at its regular time during your hospital stay, ask the nurse why. Remind your health care provider if you have any medication or food allergies, or a condition that could affect the use of any medication.

Remember to tell your health care provider if you are taking any dietary supplements or over-the-counter medications.

Finally, prepare a list of all the medications you are taking. This list should be updated monthly, with copies kept at home and shared with family members and friends. Seniors should take the list with them when they go for health care appointments, hospital stays, or emergency room visits. They should show the list to all of their health care providers.

The combination of seniors and medication can be a tricky proposition. Taking the necessary precautions, however, can make a huge difference in reducing the likelihood of potentially serious consequences.

David Goodman and Frank Esposito run Expert Home Care in New Brunswick, which specializes in live in and hourly home care, and Companion Connection Senior Care, an organization of non-medical home care agencies with more than 175 members in North America. They can be reached at 800-270-6949.



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