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How to Tell if You're Overprescribed Medications

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Merola May 20, 2022

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Polypharmacy is the term used for overprescribed medications. This is more common in older adults who have several risk factors and often have more than one chronic health condition that can be overprescribed
- Overprescription is not limited to adults. Data from 2014 showed more than 274,000 children from birth to 1 year received psychiatric drugs, 249,849 antipsychotic drugs, and 1,452 ADHD drugs
- Even the counter medications can also create drug interactions and side effects. When too many drugs are prescribed, you may be willing to take care of the side effects of another
- You may be overprescribed medications if you consistently visit multiple doctors, have a new health condition, have trouble keeping up with your medication or have new financial pressure from the expense of your medications
- Take control of your drug cabinet by writing and maintaining a list of prescriptions, supplements and OTC drugs you routinely take, share the list with your primary care physician at every visit, routinely review your medications with your doctor every year and use only one pharmacy for your prescription drugs

Another name for overprescribing medications is polypharmacy. The issue is snowballing as Big Pharma continues to develop prescription medications in the hope of treating the expectancy without addressing the underlying issues of the chronic diseases that affect the population. Polypharmacy may be thought of as the use of multiple medications at the same time by one person.

While the term is commonly used, there is not a single definition for polypharmacy.[1] The term appears to have been in use for over 100 years according to one article that states it "was used even earlier and is a pejorative term that has been used to describe both overconsumption and excessive use of drugs."[2] According to a systematic review and BMC Geriatrics,[3]

> *"The most commonly reported definition of polypharmacy was the ingestion of five or more medications daily with definitions ranging from two or more to 11 or more medications."*

While there has been no consensus on the number of medications, it is commonly accepted that polypharmacy is the prescription of too many medications. The concerns use of multiple prescriptions is almost always to treat several chronic conditions at the same time. Yet, this causes side effects, can trigger additional health concerns and even cause death.

The Elderly Are Most at Risk

Polypharmacy is most common in older adults who have several risk factors and chronic health conditions that can lead to overprescription. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,[4] it is very common in the U.S. for a least one chronic health condition and 8 in 10 have two or more.

According to the National Council on Aging,[5] 80% of adults over 65 have at least one chronic health condition and 60% have two or more. This 10 most common are:

High blood pressure	58%
High cholesterol	47%
Arthritis	31%
Coronary heart disease	29%
Diabetes	27%
Chronic kidney disease	18%
Heart failure	14%
Depression	14%
Alzheimer's disease and dementia	11%
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)	11%

Physicians have multiple tools at their disposal to evaluate whether their patients are overprescribed medications, including the Beers, START (acronym for screening tool to alert to right treatment), STOPP (screening tool of older people's prescriptions), and the Medication Appropriateness Index.[6]

One of the most significant risk factors associated with polypharmacy is the increased potential for patients to experience adverse drug events, including death. One paper reported that "outpatients taking five or more medications had an 88% increased risk of experiencing an ADE compared to those who were taking fewer medications." Nursing home residents taking nine or more medications were twice as likely to have an adverse drug event.

According to the National Institutes on Aging,[7] the risk of polypharmacy rises in patients who have two or more chronic conditions, and adults aged 65 and over are on more prescription medications than other age groups. One report from the CDC in 2015 found that 22.4% of adults aged 60 to 79 in the U.S. used at least five prescription drugs. The most common types were lipid lowering drugs, ACE inhibitors and antidepressants.

Another health tracking poll in 2019[8] reported that 51% of 50 to 64-year-olds and 28% of 18- to 29-year-olds were taking prescription drugs. The number of adults taking multiple drugs increased radically as the survey participants aged. In adults 65 and older, 54% reported taking four or more drugs each day as compared to 15% in adults aged 50 to 64.

HCP Live reported on Dr. Aubrey Knight's presentation before the 2018 AAPP Scientific Assembly, in which he cautioned the audience that until proven otherwise, any symptom in the elderly could be a drug side effect, "a medication is a poison with a desirable side effect" and advised that physicians "consider medication as a possible problem and not just as the solution."

Polypharmacy Isn't the Only Type of Overprescription

A study published in The Lancet in 2015[9] found "in cases exposure to both SSRIs and nonselective monoamine oxidase inhibitors (tricyclic antidepressants) was associated with an increased risk of autism spectrum disorders, particularly without intellectual disability" in the offspring.

In 2020, The New York Times reported[10] that data presented by the CDC showed that 19,000 children from birth to 1 year received psychiatric drugs for treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. These medications were given outside the pediatric population. The report also showed that toddlers at greatest risk were covered by Medicaid.

While these numbers are significant, they are dwarfed by data released in 2014 from the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, which "reported hundreds of thousands of toddlers were prescribed psychotropic drugs, more than 275,000 children from birth to 1 year old were included in that mix. According to their figures the numbers of children aged birth to 1 year old on these medications were:[11]

- 249,669 on antianxiety drugs (such as Xanax, Klonopin and Ativan)
- 26,486 on antidepressants (such as Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil)
- 1,452 on ADHD drugs (such as Ritalin, Adderall and Concerta)
- 654 on antipsychotics (such as Risperdal, Seroquel, and Zyprexa)

In the U.S. 3-year-old age group, the commission found 216,941 were on antianxiety drugs, 16,000 on antidepressants, 1,452 on ADHD drugs and 654 on antipsychotics. Young figures (children ages 4 to 6) were on many more drugs, including 21,000 on antipsychotics, and 22,4% of adults aged 60 to 79 in the U.S. used at least five prescription drugs. The most common types were lipid lowering drugs, ACE inhibitors and antidepressants.

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Polypharmacy Can Be Only One Type of Overprescription

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Even though the prescription rates had dramatically declined by 2017,[16] a new problem had popped up, "the use of antipsychotics in children increased, but that polypharmacy — prescribing of multiple psychotic drugs — in children is even occurring. Researchers said:

> *"...polypharmacy occurred in 44.4% of the new antipsychotic users, being more frequent in girls (55.5%) than in boys (44.5%). The two most frequent concomitant psychotropic drug classes were antidepressants (56.2%) and psychostimulants/atomoxetine (39.4%). Adolescents aged 15–18 and 11–14 years, and girls showed a concomitant use of polypharmacy during antipsychotic treatment.*
>
> *The use of psychostimulants/atomoxetine or antidepressants prior to initiation of antipsychotic treatment was strongly associated with polypharmacy during antipsychotic treatment."*

The study authors added that this is a "worrisome trend" and that prescribers need to "carefully evaluate the efficacy of psychotropic polypharmacy in children and adolescents." I agree.

Even Over-the-Counter Medications Have Consequences

Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are there you can buy at the store without a prescription. You'll find hundreds of cold preparations, antacids, pain medications and allergy relief drugs that can create drug interactions and unintended consequences. Some of these side effects include nausea, dizziness, fatigue and bleeding in the digestive tract.

You can have drug interactions with OTC medications in the same way as with prescribed medications. OTC medications can also interact with your prescription medications or your food.

Then, as you're considering the number of prescription medications you are taking, don't forget to consider the OTC drugs that you routinely use. One of the hidden dangers of polypharmacy is the chemical reaction that occur in the body when medications are mixed.

Another problem is the number of times one drug is prescribed to take care of the side effects of another. This has become known as a "prescribing cascade." It occurs when a doctor sees a novel one is using OTC drugs to counteract the side effects of prescription medications.

How Can You Tell If You Are Taking Too Many Medications?

According to the Commonwealth Fund,[17] people in the U.S. spend more per capita on prescription drugs than in other high-income countries.

While this article focuses on cost rather than number of prescriptions, cost alone would be one reason to reevaluate what drugs you're taking and why. That you're not only potentially saving some money if you eliminate one or more drugs, but you're checking to see if you're overmedicated. Consider the following signs that may show you are overprescribed medications:

You consistently visit multiple doctors — As more medical records are being kept electronically, you might think that doctors' offices communicate with each other about your case. However, that doesn't happen.

If you see a gastroenterologist for stomach issues and a rheumatologist for your arthritis, one doctor does not know what the other doctor has prescribed. You may end up taking your primary care physician to take care of the side effects or the drug interactions from medications they didn't prescribe. This is "prescribing cascade" — and end up on still another prescription to lessen the side effects of the others.

A new health condition develops — If you've been overprescribed medication, you may start developing new health conditions and symptoms. These may be a result of drug interactions or adverse drug events that go unrecognized.

They can include physical or mental symptoms such as fatigue, general aches and pains, problems with balance and motor skills and unexpected weight gain or weight loss. You may notice confusion or impaired memory, concentration problems, delayed decision-making or an inability to think rationally.

You are in a high-risk group for overprescription — People who have a higher risk of overprescription of medications include those with multiple chronic health conditions, people over age 65 and women. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, women at higher risk include those who have a longer life expectancy and their physiology increases the risk of adverse drug events.[18]

You have access to good health care — Interestingly, people with good insurance are at higher risk for polypharmacy. It's not uncommon for people in this position to see multiple doctors who are unaware of the medications being prescribed.

You have trouble keeping up with your medication — When you're taking too many prescribed drugs, it can be difficult to remember the dosing schedule and keep up with the frequency and timing. It can be a signal that you have too many medications and should review your current list with your primary care physician.

Financial pressure — Prescription drugs can be expensive. A potential sign that you might be taking more medication than is necessary is the added financial strain on your budget.

Take Control of Your Drug Cabinet

You can take several easy steps to help reduce the number of medications you or a loved one is taking, thus reducing the potential of an adverse drug event.

- **Make a list of medications** — It's helpful to begin with a list of the medications and OTC drugs you are consistently taking. This is a good starting point for yourself and to review with your primary care provider who may not know all the medication you're taking if you're prescribed by other specialists.[19]

It's a good idea to do this with your primary care physician at least once a year. This medication review is also important after being discharged from the hospital or rehab facility, since it's not uncommon to have been prescribed more medications while you are an inpatient.

Consider creating a chart of your medications to use during your medication review with your primary care provider. This chart can have a list of the drugs you're taking, the reason you're taking them, who prescribed them, when they were started and side effects you may be experiencing. This helps your physician see the big picture quickly without being multiple questions that can quickly eat up your appointment time.

This also helps you to get to know your medications, why you're taking them and how they might be affecting you. Before taking any OTC medications, talk with your pharmacist about drug interactions between the OTC and any supplement or prescribed medication you might be taking.

Bring this list with you to each of your appointments with different specialists.[20] This keeps all your health providers on the same page and helps to avoid medication errors, drug interaction drugs and over-the-counter side effects.

- **Use one pharmacy for all prescribed medications** — This allows the pharmacist to quickly ascertain whether there are any drug interactions between your prescribed medications from different doctors and answer your questions about OTC drugs and supplements.
- **Pay special attention each time a new medication is prescribed** — Read the label and check online resources. If you find information that is concerning, talk with your pharmacist and your doctor. There may be a different medication that can be used, or you may be able to use other strategies to address your health problem.

The bottom line is that you may not need all the medications you've been prescribed to manage your health conditions. Overprescribing sets up either adverse drug events or a downward spiral of increasing side effects and worsening health. A holistic approach is needed to address the key tenets of good health and overall wellness instead of attempting to cover up symptoms with more pills.

As just one example, in a study[21] of older depressed adults, 83% experienced a significant reduction in symptoms after taking strength training for 10 months. This research led researchers to conclude that exercise was "an effective antidepressant in depressed elders, while also improving strength, muscle and quality of life."[22]

There is no magic pill that fixes symptoms, removes illness and restores vigor. However, there are lifestyle choices you can make that go a long way toward achieving your goals.

Consider starting with strategies that move you toward better health, including getting an adequate amount of quality sleep, incorporating intermittent fasting, making low-carbohydrate fresh choices and incorporating high-quality fats from organically and sustainably grown meat and dairy.

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Leahel Joined On 2/2/2020 5:52:19 AM
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The people at greatest risk of over medications are those who have doctors and those who have elderly relatives to look after for themselves. There are thousands, Everybody knows of people who have to think and who have the responsibility for their own health ERR's or elderly relatives providers. Hmmmmm, what could go wrong...? Just wandering!!

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alexsenior Joined On 10/10/2011 5:25:10 PM
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80% of parents either to die than to think instead

Rank as Spam · Posted On: 5/30/2022 3:53:01 AM
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versatile Joined On 10/16/2007 4:23:09 PM
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Now to tell if you are being overprescribed medications? If you are on prescribed medications with no cell plan - you are being overprescribed. Chronic medicine ensures the persistence of chronic disease. The way to end chronic prescription is a cure. Ask your doctor if a cure is right for you.

Reply · Rank as Spam · Posted On: 5/30/2022 5:34:22 AM
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Fortyonebillionandfourteen Joined On 6/12/2020 5:19:01 AM
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Well if you are on medication with no end plan the end plan is probably death. I've got to 79 with none, only angina, jaundice

Rank as Spam · Posted On: 5/30/2022 11:06:03 AM
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RonDeal Joined On 3/4/2019 6:42:00 PM
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Question: How do you know if you're being over prescribed Big Pharma drugs? - Answer: You're taking one!

Reply · Rank as Spam · Posted On: 5/30/2022 8:07:11 AM
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Mary999 Joined On 11/23/2009 11:23:14 AM
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You should visit left your health care provider about your herbal supplements and vitamins you are taking, as these can interact with medications. I need to take minimal medications but I do use herbal supplements and vitamins daily. I also take metamucil and I do not see a medical professional that often, unless it is for an annual physical. MMFMFF!!!

Reply · Rank as Spam · Posted On: 5/30/2022 6:39:05 AM
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juststone Joined On 1/8/2012 11:23:54 AM
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From the 70s definitely this discussion is going the community since they were raped in six year need a compact bell fired up with never ever ever ever

Like Dislike

cdbevis1
Joined On 7/10/2010 9:47:44 AM
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I haven't taken a pharmaceutical in thirty years and since I followed my heart and intuition rather than money or career I cannot afford many supplements and was trekking in the Himalayas and walking the Camino at 62, in 2018. What has slowed me down was getting Covid (while dealing with other issues) and a couple of months later heart issues. I still walk but cannot overexert. Meditation and quercetin help. Before Covid I could run.

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 10:14:41 AM
Like Dislike

e_g5680
Joined On 11/16/2014 1:22:46 AM
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Hi Leahoz, I agree with you. I have to find all info from my trusted sites like Dr. mercola, Greenmed info, Robert Kennedy Jr, Jonathon Otto, Jonathan Landsman, Dr. sircus and many more. I started my journey about 12 yrs ago in finding about natural health. I think all readers here are of a similar feeling. I was just surprised that a new doc here (in ThailNd) told me that my intake of supplements could be the reason for my elevated liver enzymes, do you know anything about this?

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 8:49:04 AM
Like Dislike

tallulah3
Joined On 4/21/2021 9:26:59 AM
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I'm not on any prescription drugs. I do take a Claritin every morning for allergies

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 8:45:40 AM
Like Dislike

anthony.aaron47
Joined On 10/20/2021 12:55:41 PM
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There are very helpful and reliable homeopathic means to accomplish the same end and there are no side effects

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 12:26:33 PM
Like Dislike

phylliscrespo
Joined On 6/11/2021 10:34:33 AM
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Dr Berg says allergies are caused by liver problems. Low stomach acid. He recommends modified keto diet and betaine HCL supplement. It is working for me.

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 4:14:43 PM
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tallulah3
Joined On 4/21/2021 9:26:59 AM
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Thanks for the advice. Seems like I've been taking antihistamines forever

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 4:23:27 PM
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MASONMANNIX
Joined On 11/29/2012 9:14:59 AM
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I lol tell you how I found out I was being overprescribed: I had a "delayed response" when trying to slam on the breaks and got into a car accident while I was on Cardura, a heart medication that has a duel use as a muscle relaxer to help people urinate as I was having severe water retention issues and Floxin which I was told by the doctor was a low level antibiotic used for treating urinary tract infections (he told me that's what I probably had). He gave me multiple refills on both. On a October 1997 Saturday night got into a car accident and sustained $2,500+ in damages to my car, I got off both meds, stopped seeing this doctor and proceeded to pay better attention to how my body was reacting to medications, foods and chemical exposures. I learned the hard way!

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 8:39:33 AM
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forbiddenhealing
Joined On 2/21/2011 9:51:43 AM
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Try polystupid...polylarceny...Polly wanna cracker?....Instead of correcting root causes of these preventable chronic diseases, "Only a drug can cure disease" is the dominating idea. It frames the system where certain drugs can be valuable, especially in acute cases where prevention or early treatments were never a thing....How did it morph into piling wrong ideas upon more wrong/profitable ideas? So many side effects as to not know what the hell is going on....So many false claims and bad outcomes from this "scientific inquisition" where objections become blasphemy. Did Iraq do 9/11? Obviously not, but bombs were the drug of choice and source of profit for the empire. Just shut up. Instead of using foods and supplements to address biological imperatives, let's just blast away at the most convenient symptom! Pharma becomes a religion, and so many poor souls are tricked by "Their Science."

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 7:21:21 AM
Like Dislike

anthony.aaron47
Joined On 10/20/2021 12:55:41 PM
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Our modern allopathic medical model goes back more than 100 years to when the Rockefellers took over the design and aims of medical schools and it's been downhill ever since. Even the spanish flu was a direct result of their interference/experiments in medicine www.lewrockwell.com/2020/07/gary-g-kohls/the-true-story-of-the-1918-so... and www.unz.com/ironanoff/the-1918-rockefeller-us-army-worldwide-pandemic/

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 12:33:29 PM
Like Dislike

BillieBob
Joined On 11/15/2008 7:42:37 PM
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forbidden, Those are three hilarious 'polys'. Thanks for the much needed laugh.

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 6:03:07 PM
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cat86887
Joined On 11/9/2017 5:28:11 AM
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My husband told his primary care pusher he was done with statins, and in less than a week, both the primary care and cardiologist had called in 3 different prescriptions for 3 different statins. Then the pharmacy (national chain) started texting and calling for him to come pick them up.

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 5:33:33 AM
Like Dislike

davidle
Joined On 5/7/2011 7:38:57 AM
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I tell my doctors that I refuse to take statins so don't bother prescribing them.

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 8:20:50 AM
Like Dislike

e_g5680
Joined On 11/16/2014 1:22:46 AM
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Are dietary supplements (vitamins, minerals) considered risk factors in this case? I take many supplements, most of them recommended by Dr. Mercola.

Reply | Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 1:11:18 AM
Like Dislike

Leahoz
Joined On 2/2/2020 9:55:19 AM
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Hello e_g5680, I also take many supplements, that I have researched, but Dr Mercola has lead me to some of search these, all I can say is that our soils are depleted by big Ag, too many pollutions abound and any way you can support yourself nutritionally is a good idea.

Mark as Spam | Posted On 5/30/2022 1:19:25 AM
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