

# Stay Safe

## Understanding polypharmacy and anticholinergic medications

**Polypharmacy** occurs when a patient uses multiple medications at the same time. **Anticholinergic medications** are a class of medications used for common conditions such as allergies, nausea, muscle spasms, mental health issues, and overactive bladder, but they can cause unwanted effects.

### Why is it important?

**Increased risk of side effects:** Patients aged 65 and older are at a much higher risk of experiencing unwanted side effects when taking multiple medications.<sup>1</sup> Studies show an **88% increased risk** of health challenges, including falls and memory changes.<sup>2</sup>



### What can you do?

**Discuss your medications:** Talk to your healthcare provider about anticholinergic medications you may be taking and any side effects such as dizziness, dry mouth, blurred vision, sudden confusion, and falls.

**Ask about alternatives:** Discuss with your healthcare provider if there are safer medication options or non-drug options available.

**Educate yourself:** Understand the potential risks associated with your medications. Know which medications are anticholinergic medications.

**Review regularly:** Have regular medication reviews with your healthcare provider to determine if each medication is still needed.

**Stay informed:** Keep a list of your medications, including dose and reasons for use. Bring this list to every doctor appointment.

## Key recommendations for older adults

**Limit Anticholinergic Medications:** The American Geriatrics Society recommends avoiding using two or more anticholinergic medications at the same time because it can increase the risk of falls, memory changes, and sudden confusion.<sup>1,3</sup>

## Know the risks with anticholinergic medications

**Medications that can increase the risk of falls, confusion, and other side effects include:**<sup>1</sup>

- **Antidepressants** like amitriptyline
- **Antihistamines** like diphenhydramine
- **Anti-nausea medications** like promethazine
- **Antiparkinsonian agents** like benztropine
- **Antipsychotics** like olanzapine
- **Antispasmodics** like dicyclomine
- **Bladder control medications** like oxybutynin
- **Muscle relaxants** like cyclobenzaprine

See page 2 for a list of common medications.

## If you need to stop a medication

**Never stop taking a medication abruptly without talking to your healthcare provider.** Some medications require a slow decrease to reduce withdrawal symptoms. If you have concerns about your medications or the risk of polypharmacy, reach out to your healthcare provider for guidance and support.

## Anticholinergic medications<sup>†</sup>

### Antidepressants:

- amitriptyline
- amoxapine
- clomipramine
- desipramine
- doxepin > 6 mg/day
- imipramine
- nortriptyline
- paroxetine

### Antihistamines:

- brompheniramine
- chlorpheniramine
- cyproheptadine
- dimenhydrinate
- diphenhydramine- oral
- doxylamine
- hydroxyzine
- meclizine
- triprolidine

### Anti-nausea medications:

- prochlorperazine
- promethazine

### Antiparkinsonian agents:

- benztropine
- trihexyphenidyl

### Antipsychotics:

- chlorpromazine
- clozapine
- olanzapine
- perphenazine

### Antispasmodics: (\*excludes eye products)

- atropine\*
- clidinium-chlordiazepoxide
- dicyclomine
- homatropine\*
- hyoscyamine
- scopolamine\*

### Bladder control medications:

- darifenacin
- fesoterodine
- flavoxate
- oxybutynin
- solifenacin
- tolterodine
- trospium

### Muscle relaxants:

- cyclobenzaprine
- orphenadrine

### Source

1. The 2023 American Geriatrics Society Beers Criteria Update Expert Panel. American Geriatrics Society 2023 Updated AGS Beers Criteria for potentially inappropriate medication use in older adults. J Am Geriatr Society. 2023; 71(7):2052-81. doi: 10.1111/jgs.18372.
2. Maher RL, Hanlon JT, Hajjar ER. Clinical Consequences of Polypharmacy in Elderly. Expert opinion on drug safety. 2014; 13(1):57-65. doi: 10.1517/14740338.2013.827660.
3. Campbell N, Boustani M, Limbil T, et al. The cognitive impact of anticholinergics: a clinical review. Clinical Interventions in Aging. 2009; 4:225-33. doi: 10.2147/cia.s5358.

<sup>†</sup> Includes combination products that contain a target medication listed and the following routes of administration: buccal, nasal, oral, transdermal, rectal and sublingual. Injectable and inhalation are excluded.

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