



The National

CONSUMER VOICE

for Quality Long-Term Care

formerly NCCNHR

## End the Misuse of Antipsychotic Medications Among Nursing Home Residents

### What is the Issue?

Residents of long-term care facilities are increasingly being placed on antipsychotic medications despite having no proper diagnosis of psychosis to warrant their use. In 2016, 16.1% of nursing home residents were given antipsychotic medications. Use is much higher among residents with dementia - the very individuals that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warns are at serious risk of medical complications and death from taking antipsychotics. The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine found in a 2016 study that 68% of residents with dementia across 57 nursing home facilities were given antipsychotic drugs.

### Why is Ending the Misuse of Antipsychotics Important to Long-Term Care Consumers?

The misuse of antipsychotic medications in nursing homes can harm long-term care consumers in many ways. When used inappropriately among nursing home residents, antipsychotic medications can:

- ***Place Nursing Home Residents at Increased Risk of Injury, Harm and Death:*** Antipsychotic drugs, when prescribed for elderly persons with dementia, can have serious medical complications, including loss of independence, over-sedation, confusion, increased respiratory infections, falls, and strokes. In fact, one study found residents taking antipsychotics had more than triple the likelihood of having a stroke compared to residents not taking these medications. Even worse, antipsychotics can be deadly; in 2005, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued “Black Box” warnings for antipsychotics stating that individuals diagnosed with dementia are at an increased risk of death from their use.
- ***Be Employed as a Chemical Restraint for Nursing Home Residents:*** A chemical restraint is a drug not needed to treat medical symptoms and used because it is more convenient for facility staff or to punish residents. Although the Medicare and Medicaid programs prohibit chemical restraints, antipsychotic medications continue to be used for residents with dementia as a means of behavior control and/or as a substitute for good, individualized care. For this reason, it is important to ensure these medications are being used only when appropriate among residents with proper diagnoses for psychotic disorders.
- ***Destroy the Quality of Life and Dignity of Nursing Home Residents:*** Antipsychotics can be so powerful that they sedate residents to the point where they become listless and unresponsive. Residents may be slumped in wheelchairs or unable to get up from bed; they may no longer be able to participate in activities they enjoy or even talk with their loved ones.

- **Cost All Long-Term Care Consumers Billions of Dollars:** These medications often come with a hefty price tag, so the misuse and overprescribing of antipsychotics in long-term care facilities is extremely costly for the Medicare and Medicaid programs as well as for taxpayers. Ending the misuse of these medications among nursing home residents would help save precious health care dollars that could be used to serve beneficiaries.

### What are the Alternatives?

There are a number of alternative approaches that can be used to care for residents with dementia, such as:

- ⇒ Identifying and determining the cause of behavioral symptoms (anger, agitation, swearing, continuous wandering, etc.). Labeling people as “problem behaviors” only masks the problem.
- ⇒ Developing an individualized care plan to address these symptoms.
- ⇒ Good care practices, such as consistent staff assignments, adequate numbers of staff, staff training in how to care for people without physical or chemical restraints, increased exercise or time outdoors, monitoring and managing acute and chronic pain, and planning individualized activities have been emphasized by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) as nonpharmacological treatments and therapies for residents with dementia and other cognitive disorders.
- ⇒ Staff training in how to care for people without physical or chemical restraints.

### What are the Signs of Someone who has been Improperly Given Antipsychotics for Dementia?

The individual is exhibiting behavioral symptoms such as:

- ◇ Agitation and anger
- ◇ Screaming, even swearing
- ◇ Hitting and pacing
- ◇ Confusion, paranoia and delusions
- ◇ Continuous wandering or
- ◇ Any other significant change in behavior, including: lethargy, decreased appetite, and insomnia

If the individual has been showing any of the behavioral symptoms listed above, ask what has changed.

### What Can I Do to Promote the Safety of My Loved Ones with Dementia in Nursing Homes?

- Ask for a care plan conference and ask why each drug was ordered, the potential side effects of each drug and possible drug interactions
- Make sure the right questions are asked – use why, when, where and how questions to consider as many reasons for the behavior as possible
- Keep the focus on the resident’s needs
- Monitor the care plan – if it’s not being followed, speak up immediately
- Work closely with staff to help them get to know the resident
- If drugs are being considered for behavioral symptoms, ask that other approaches be tried first
- Speak with the doctor if s/he wants to order a psychoactive drug. Ask about the risks.

## What are My Rights as a Resident?

Federal and state nursing home laws prohibit the use of chemical restraints and unnecessary drugs, and require that nursing homes provide:

- Quality care so individuals attain or maintain their highest functional level
- Enhance individuals' quality of life by supporting their right to dignity, respect and consideration
- Honor freedom of choice in care and treatment decisions, including being able to provide informed consent for, or refuse, any proposed treatment
- Provide individualized care based on a thorough evaluation and care plan
- Prompt response to complaints

**Residents who need assistance can contact their advocate, the local long-term care ombudsman. Find your ombudsman at [http://theconsumervoice.org/get help](http://theconsumervoice.org/get_help).**

For more information on this issue, please visit  
[http://theconsumervoice.org/issues/issue\\_details/misusing-antipsychotics](http://theconsumervoice.org/issues/issue_details/misusing-antipsychotics).

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