

Information About Inappropriate Drug Use for Long-Term Care Consumers

What's the Problem?

Used appropriately, medications can cure disease, ease pain and enhance quality of life. Used inappropriately, drugs can cause disability, pain and decrease quality of life. Psychoactive drugs affect the brain and influence thinking, feeling and reacting. These drugs pose special risks for older people and increase the risk of death in persons with dementia. Psychoactive drugs used to treat behavioral symptoms in place of good care are called chemical restraints.

What Should Happen?

Caregivers should first work to treat underlying problems – relieving pain, personalizing care, connecting with the individual. Caregivers need to assess (or evaluate) both the individual and the environment. The assessment is used to understand the resident's physical, mental, emotional and social well-being and address behavioral symptoms if they do occur. Agitation, confusion or other behavioral changes can be caused by untreated infections, dehydration, pain, medication reactions, boredom, loneliness or other physical or psychosocial reasons. Ask the doctor to evaluate possible medical causes of any behavioral concerns.

*Behaviors are a form of communication. Behavioral Symptoms are **warning signs** telling us something is wrong.*

When Should I Be Concerned?

The individual is exhibiting behavioral symptoms such as: anger, agitation, screaming, swearing, hitting, pacing, paranoia, delusions, continuous wandering or any other significant change in behavior. Alternately, if the individual has been showing behavioral symptoms and is suddenly subdued, lethargic, has decreased appetite, insomnia or other, ask what's changed.



A growing number of caregivers are proving that a better way of caring for individuals with dementia focuses on comfort, timely assessment and response to the underlying causes of any behavioral symptoms.

What Can I DO?

- 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
- Know your rights under the law
- 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.
- Contact your long-term care ombudsman – search for your local program at: www.ltombudsman.org

What Are My Rights?

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