

Prescribing cascade: Taking more meds than you may need?

Understanding when side effects are treated as new medical conditions



You go in to see your doctor and walk out with a prescription for a chronic health issue. A few weeks later, you're back at the doctor's office, this time with different symptoms. A new diagnosis, another prescription, and home you go.

But wait. What exactly is the second prescription for? Is it, in fact, to treat a new medical condition, or is it perhaps to treat symptoms that act like a new condition but are actually a side effect of the first prescription?

The second scenario — a prescription that is actually treating a side effect of another medication — is called a “prescribing cascade.”

“In this situation, the doctor misinterprets the drug side effect in which a new drug therapy causes a new medical condition, leading to yet another drug therapy,” says Dr. Paula Rochon, vice-president of research at Women's College Hospital and the RTO/ERO chair in geriatric medicine.

Rochon and collaborator Dr. Jerry Gurwitz have been studying prescribing cascades for more than 20 years, focusing — in followup studies — on specific medications that are often part of a prescribing cascade. An example shared in a Women's College Hospital update describes the prescribing of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which are often used to treat pain. These NSAIDs, however, can cause an increase in blood pressure for which doctors may prescribe a new medication.

“In the two decades since we first described prescribing cascades, they have made an important impact on medication safety in Canada and abroad,” Rochon says. “We hope that continuing to explore the issue will prompt even more clinicians and patients to think carefully about their prescriptions.”

TIPS

Staying on Top of Prescribing Cascades

Carry out a regular inventory to keep track of your medications, and stay up to date with your records. Here are some tips to help you identify prescribing cascades.

- 1 Keep your medication record up to date. Include the following:
 - All medications, including non-prescription products
 - Vitamins and minerals
 - Herbal/natural products
 - Drug allergies
- 2 Review all your medications with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.
- 3 Ask questions to help identify prescribing cascades:
 - Am I experiencing a symptom that could be a drug side effect?
 - Is the new drug being used to treat a side effect from another drug that I am taking?
 - Is a safer drug available, or could I be taking a lower dose?
 - Do I really need this drug at all?

A DIY Worksheet for Managing Your Meds

CHANGES?

Keep track: Have any medications been added, stopped or changed? Why?

CONTINUE?

Always ask: What medications do I need to keep taking? Why?

PROPER USE?

Be informed: How do I take my medications and for how long?

MONITOR?

Be aware: How will I know if my medication is working? What side effects should I watch for?

FOLLOW UP?

Plan ahead: Do I need any tests? When do I book my next visit?

Source: Adapted from "5 Questions to Ask About Your Medications," Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada, ismp-canada.org/medrec/5questions.htm

Do you have a story to share about when you discovered you were taking a medication to counteract another medication? Tell us about it! Email us at foundation@rto-ero.org.

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