Get the Facts about Antipsychotic Drugs *and* Dementia Care

Medications can be an important part of the care provided to nursing home residents. However it is critical to monitor their use carefully. This fact sheet focuses on one type of medication: antipsychotics.

What are Antipsychotic Medications?

Antipsychotic medications are potent drugs that may have serious side effects. They are indicated to treat conditions and diagnoses such as schizophrenia. They are not generally used for the treatment of symptoms of dementia.

Why is this an Important Issue?

In the past, the use of antipsychotics to treat people with Alzheimer's Disease and other dementias was often considered an accepted practice. Now we know that antipsychotic medications that are prescribed inappropriately may be dangerous, especially for the elderly and people with dementia. These medications can have serious, life-threatening side effects such as stroke and falls. They may increase the risk of death for elderly residents. There is now a national campaign to stop their inappropriate use.

How Does this Relate to Dementia Care?

Some people with dementia may, at times, have behavioral symptoms such as: agitation, physical aggression or vocalizations or psychological symptoms ranging from depression and anxiety to hallucinations, delusions and psychosis. These symptoms may be the result of physical discomfort (such as hunger, a headache or an infection) or emotional upset (resulting from things like loud or confusing noises, being touched in a surprising or uncomfortable way or having a daily routine disrupted). Except when there is an immediate danger to the individual or another resident, the current standard of practice is to provide care that keeps residents comfortable and responds to their needs (and symptoms) without drugs whenever possible.

When May Antipsychotic Medications be Useful?

Antipsychotic medications and other "psychoactive" medications that may make people drowsy or quiet can be helpful in certain limited circumstances, such as when treating a diagnosed psychotic condition (like schizophrenia) or to temporarily alleviate a situation (such as when someone is dangerous to him or herself or others). When prescribed, it is important that the lowest dose possible is used and that care is taken to assess the individual and factors that may be causing the symptoms. Care should be taken to identify and try non-drug approaches to relieve symptoms and, to the greatest extent possible, to reduce and eliminate the use of drugs. Antipsychotic medications should not be used in the long term to mask symptoms by sedating the person. If medications are used to treat behavioral symptoms of dementia in place of good care, this may be a form of chemical restraint and is prohibited by Federal law.

Residents' Rights

- **Informed Decision-Making:** Residents have the right to be informed about the risks and benefits of any medication.
- **Right to Refuse:** Residents have the right to refuse a medication.
- **Freedom from Chemical Restraints:** It is against the law to give medications that do not benefit the resident, such as for convenience of staff.

What is Being Done to Stop Unnecessary Use of Antipsychotic Medications?

Education: The government is working with nursing homes, physicians and other caregivers, as well consumer advocates, to improve dementia care and reduce unnecessary medications.

Transparency: Medicare.gov Nursing Home Compare has information on antipsychotic medication use for each nursing home.

Enforcement: Federal and State inspectors hold providers accountable for prescribing antipsychotic medications without a specific, appropriate reason for their use.

What You Can Do

Be Informed about antipsychotic medications and residents' rights. See "Resources" below for help and more information.

Ask to Speak to the Physician or Practitioner: A physician must supervise a resident's care. Residents have the right to refuse antipsychotic medications or other treatments.

Contact a Resident Advocate: Your local Long Term Care Ombudsman or advocacy organization can help. They can be found through The Consumer Voice (theconsumervoice.org).

File a Complaint with your State department of health.

Who Can Speak for a Resident

Resident with Capacity: If a resident is able to give (or withhold) consent only he or she has the right to do so.

Resident without Capacity: The resident's legally authorized representative may give (or withhold) consent.

Note: Consent to use an antipsychotic medication may be withdrawn at any time by the resident or representative.

Questions to Ask the Nursing Home

What is the reason for this medication?

What are the symptoms that the medication should improve?

Did the team attempt to identify the causes of the person's behavior before using medication to address the symptoms?

Did the team try to use non-medication approaches before trying this medication?

How will this medication be monitored and, if possible, reduced? (In regulations, this is called Gradual Dose Reduction).

Remember: All nursing homes are required to have a system in place to care for people with dementia. State and Federal inspectors conduct nursing home surveys to ensure that these regulations are followed. See "What You Can Do" and "Resources" on this page.

Resources

medicare.gov/nhcompare
The Federal website provides information on individual nursing homes nationwide, including their rates of antipsychotic medication use. It also has contact information for State oversight agencies, LTC Ombudsmen and the Federal Nursing Home Complaint Form.

nursinghome411.org
Nursing home consumer resource website from the Long Term Care Community Coalition with resources on antipsychotic medications.

canhr.org/stop-drugging
The California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform's Campaign to Stop Chemical Restraints in Nursing Homes has a variety of valuable resources including videos and an excellent guide, *Toxic Medicine*.

theconsumervoice.org
The National Consumer Voice has a dedicated page with antipsychotic medication resources, contact information for Long Term Care Ombudsman and State LTC advocates and many other resources.

LTCCC LONG TERM CARE COMMUNITY COALITION
Working to improve long term care through research, education & advocacy

LTCCC is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting the rights and welfare of long term care consumers in all settings, including nursing homes, assisted living facilities and the community, through policy research, systemic advocacy and public education. For more information on this and other long term care issues, visit our website: www.ltccc.org. This brochure was funded in part by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).