



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks  
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.  
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## "Polypharmacy In Elderly Patients"

The practice of taking multiple drugs simultaneously (polypharmacy) is becoming routine, especially in so-called old folks. When it comes to medications, I always first suggest relying on the adage, "Start low and go slow." Today, Americans are the number one pill poppers on the planet and this is especially true for the elderly and the 75 million aging baby boomers. There is increased risks for cancer, heart disease, stroke and overall mortality associated with the common antioxidant vitamins A, C and E supplements and the common non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as rofecoxib (Vioxx) and lumiracoxib have been associated with twice the risk of heart attack, while ibuprofen was associated with more than three times the risk of stroke. And, if all "vascular events" - heart attacks, stroke, or vascular disease - were taken together, the risks increased by 40% on these drugs. Ibuprofen can double the risk of suffering a heart attack and Vioxx was banned in the USA in 2004. Yet, other "wonder drugs" keep coming down the pharmaceutical "pipe line of profit." Our elderly, who take common drugs for the treatment of incontinence, allergies or high blood pressure, were found to walk more slowly and were less able to care for themselves. Medicines that block acetylcholine ("anticholinergic medications") can speed up physical and mental deterioration in the elderly. Common anticholinergic drugs include the blood pressure drug nifedipine (sold as Adalat or Procardia), the stomach antacid ranitidine (Zantac), both of which have moderate anticholinergic properties, and Pfizer Inc's incontinence drug tolterodine (Detrol). Investigator, Dr. Kaycee Sink, in referring to the decline said, "The effect is essentially that of a three- to four-year increase in age." Also, elderly people who took anticholinergic drugs had a 50% greater rate of memory decline. This seriously limits those who are already limited. A 2009 Canadian study reported that 92% of patients 65 years or older were taking a median of 5 prescribed medications before the start of any cancer treatment. And, a 2008 USA study reported that 96% of patients 44 to 85 years of age were taking 5.5 prescription drugs prior to their chemotherapy. In addition to the prescribed medications, 71% of patients reported using a mean of 2.2 OTC (over-the-counter) drugs, and 69% were taking vitamins, herbs, or other supplements.

In the America that I love, we should try to "take the smallest dose for the shortest length of time possible." If in doubt, consult your physician and be sure to tell him "everything" you are taking. We must help the elderly prevent "drug stacking" by keeping a close eye on the medications our loved ones are being given at the "Drugs R Us Hospital and Nursing home."

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.  
Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate  
27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444  
985-229-6955 – Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax  
[rhowesmd@hughes.net](mailto:rhowesmd@hughes.net)    [www.iwillfindthecure.org](http://www.iwillfindthecure.org)