

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Common Drugs May Mimic Dementia”

Older people often take multiple medications, and this can spell trouble for dementia patients. Dementia is increasing at an alarming rate. Alzheimer disease and other dementias are notoriously challenging to treat. While some drugs may slow cognitive deterioration, none will reverse the condition. Approximately 6 million Americans have dementia and nearly a half-million new Alzheimer's cases will be diagnosed annually. A 2020 report in *The Lancet* estimates that roughly 50 million people around the world live with dementia. Dementia, which is not technically a disease but a term for impaired ability to think, remember or make decisions, is one of the most feared impairments of old age. About 5% of those age 71 to 79 have dementia, and about 37% of those about 90 years old live with it. We now know that many common drugs may lead to side effects that mimic dementia symptoms, making it even more difficult to diagnose and treat. Last year, several physicians described dementia patients whose increasing levels of confusion appeared to have been caused by a litany of medications they'd been prescribed. The phenomenon, known as “medication fog,” may be a bigger problem than we had thought. An estimated 91% of people over the age of 65 take at least one prescribed medication, and 41% use five or more, which doctors refer to as “polypharmacy.” The American Geriatrics Society recently updated a list of medications that can mimic dementia symptoms or make them worse. The list includes a range of drugs, from muscle relaxants and antihistamines, to anti-anxiety medicines and sleep aids. Many of these drugs have anticholinergic effects, meaning they can reduce or interfere with a neurotransmitter in the body that's essential for healthy nerve function. Such interference can result in dementia-like side effects, including increased confusion, drowsiness, and impaired thinking skills. The study authors noted a significant increase in dementia risk for those using anticholinergic antidepressants, anti-Parkinson's drugs, antipsychotics, bladder antimuscarinic drugs, and antiepileptic drugs. Many common medications have at least some anticholinergic effects—so many, in fact, that it's estimated that up to half of US adults take at least one of these drugs. Here's a list of some medications that can cause symptoms like confusion, blurry vision, and problems urinating, according to Harvard Health and the American Geriatrics Society: Antidepressants like amitriptyline (found in Elavil), paroxetine, imipramine (Tofranil), and bupropion; the anti-Parkinson's drug trihexyphenidyl (Artrane); the irritable bowel syndrome drug dicyclomine (Bentyl); antihistamines like diphenhydramine (Benadryl and Tylenol) and chlorpheniramine; the pain reliever meperidine (Demerol) and Flexeril, Robaxin and Soma.

In the America that I love, we should keep current on how to avoid dementia and support those with dementia. Physicians may consider “de-prescribing” certain drugs in the elderly.

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