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When medications harm instead of help patients

Written by Lois Alcosser - The Greens at Cannondale
Sunday, May 31, 2009

The importance of correct dosage and full understanding of medication usage, timing, side effects and method of delivery is generally accepted, but subtleties, such as different responses and requirements, especially for older adults, is not as well known.

At a recent meeting of the Connecticut Geriatrics Society, hosted by The Greens of Cannondale, the topic was a review of potentially inappropriate medications prescribed for older adults. Patricia Gunning, clinical pharmacist at Greenwich Hospital, presented the results of a study which identified 48 individual medications to avoid, as well as 20 different diseases where certain medications should be avoided. Of these inappropriate drugs, 66 were considered to have adverse outcomes of high severity.

Ms. Gunning said that 30% of hospital admissions for older adults can be linked to drug-related problems or drug toxic effects. If medication-related problems were ranked as a disease, it would be the fifth leading cause of death in the United States. In 2000, it was estimated that medication-related problems caused 106,000 deaths at a cost of \$85 billion.

"From ages 60 to 70, on average, people may be taking six pills, from age 80, eight pills. It is not unusual for older adults to be taking 15-20 pills a day," she said. The possibilities of harmful interaction are increased with every additional medication. Each drug adds a different risk. Valium is inappropriate, for example, because it doesn't get eliminated readily. Benadryl should never be prescribed for elderly patients. Diuretics can cause dizziness and falls, some medications can cause cognitive changes. Narcotics can cause bowel restriction, non-steroid anti-inflammatory medications need regular adjustment. When there is excessive body fat, medications can have an undesirable, prolonged effect because some medications are fat-loving. Other medications aren't absorbed properly because there is deficient stomach acidity.

Something that appears to be a good solution, like inhalers for asthma, aren't recommended for everyone. They're helpful for some people, but can be harmful for others. "Pharmokinetic activity is what a specific drug does to the body. Pharmacodynamics is how individual patients respond to each medication," Ms. Gunning explained.

Genetic differences cause different reactions. People metabolize differently. And, of course, often the drug was prescribed correctly, but the patient is taking it incorrectly. "Good geriatrics starts with medication management," Ms. Gunning said.

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