

AM I TAKING TOO MANY PILLS?



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DEAR READER,

When used properly, medication helps to prevent disorders, alleviate complaints and heal diseases. But anyone on prolonged treatment for many different complaints often has to take a lot of pills. In medical jargon the term for the parallel taking of several medications is *multimedication* or *polypharmacy*. The problem here is that the higher the number of medicines taken, the more adverse drug reactions occur.

This Patient Information explains why patients are prescribed many different medicines and looks at the associated risks. You can play an active role by only taking the medicines you really need.

At a glance: What is multimedication?

- Multimedication means the parallel taking of different medicines.
- Various medicines can influence each other and cause more adverse drug reactions like nausea, constipation, headaches, drowsiness or bleeding. A hospital stay or, in the worst case scenario, death may also be the consequence of multimedication.
- There are several options when it comes to reducing the number of medicines taken and, by extension, the adverse drug reactions: for instance to stop taking any medicines no longer required or medicines that have no effect.
- The most important thing is to talk to your doctor. He must know exactly what medicines you are taking. Together with you, he can decide which ones you should and which ones you shouldn't take.

▶ WHAT LEADS TO MULTIMEDICATION?

There are several reasons for the parallel taking of numerous different medicines:

- A patient suffers from various disorders that have to be treated on a permanent basis with medication. As more health problems tend to appear with advancing age, older people in particular may be taking several different kinds of medication at the same time.
- Over the course of time, other new medicines are added but the "old" ones are not changed.
- Unsuccessful treatments are not discontinued.
- Additional medicines are prescribed to treat sudden complaints or disorders. Once the patient has recovered, they are not discontinued.
- A patient sees different doctors. They don't know anything or enough about the medicines prescribed by their colleagues.
- Side-effects occur which are not recognised as such. Instead of discontinuing the medication responsible or lowering the dose, the patient is prescribed another medicine to alleviate the side-effect.
- The patient takes medicines available over the counter. His doctor doesn't know about this.
- Often the patient or the doctor is of the opinion that every health disorder has to be treated with medication. However, many disorders are temporary, simply disappear with time or do not require medication.
- The expectations of the benefits of medicinal treatment are too high.
- Treatment goals are too ambitious, for instance very low blood sugar or blood pressure values. This leads to the prescribing of more medicines or doses that are too high.

► WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF MULTIMEDICATION?

The regular, correct taking of medicines is the decisive contributory factor to the successful treatment of complaints or disorders. However, it is often not easy to take medicine in the recommended way. A person taking several medicines becomes confused more quickly about the right medicine and the right dose at the right time. An overly complex medicine plan can lead to you not taking your pills correctly.

Each additional medicine increases the risk of adverse drug reactions. In most cases they manifest as general complaints like tiredness, loss of appetite, dizziness, nausea, confusion or drowsiness. Falls and serious injuries are other consequences. Patients on anticoagulants may experience spontaneous, heavier or prolonged bleeding. Some patients have to be hospitalised for treatment for the side-effects of medication.

Overall it can be said that when patients take several medicines, it is no longer possible to predict the effects, interactions or adverse drug reactions they will experience in their bodies. Less is sometimes more!

► WHAT YOU CAN DO

It is not always possible to avoid taking several medicines but some of them may be unnecessary. The following tips should help you, together with your doctor, decide on the medicinal treatment most suited to your individual needs:

- One of the doctors you consult should be your main contact person for all medication questions. Trust him. He must be informed about which medicines you are taking and how, and which ones you are not taking or taking differently from the manner prescribed.

► MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and other useful links

This Patient Information is based on the family doctor guidelines "Multimedication". You can access all the sources used, the methodology document and other useful links here:

www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/quellen-und-methodik/multimedikation

Patient Information "How to take medicines safely": www.patinfo.org

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- Talk to your doctor about your wishes, fears and concerns. Together you can decide which complaints or disorders need to be alleviated the most urgently.
- Make a separate appointment at the doctor's and bring along all your medicines, including ones you bought yourself, and any package inserts you have at home.
- If you are on 5 or more medicines or have at least 3 chronic disorders, it is advisable for your doctor to review your medication with you once a year.
- Keep a list of all the medication you are on – both prescribed and anything you bought yourself. This list should include not only tablets but also, for instance, sprays, drops or ointments. Plant-based products, vitamins and so on should be listed, too.
- Always keep this list on you. Present it each time you see a doctor, go to the pharmacy or spend time in hospital.
- If you develop new complaints when taking a medication, go and see your doctor.
- Feel free to ask your doctor whether you really still need all the medicines you are on. Studies have shown: the fewer pills patients have to take, the more regularly they take them.
- Don't stop taking any medication without consulting your doctor. Don't decide on your own to change the amount of medicines you take either.
- Not every health disorder has to be treated with medication. Often, untreated complaints disappear on their own or can be relieved in a different way. Talk to your doctor about whether it's possible to simply wait and see or whether perhaps physical activity or another form of action could help.

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