

## Older Adults and Prescription Medications: Challenges and Strategies

**Summary:** Older adults take more medications than the general population, and as a result are vulnerable. Older adults are at a higher risk for adverse drug events, having prescription medications taken by family/friends, and for prescription misuse themselves. The following is a summary of some of the main issues related to older adults and prescription medications, and strategies to address these problems.

**Challenge:** Millions of Americans benefit from medications to manage pain and improve their quality of life. However, older adults (65+) tend to take more medications, and are therefore vulnerable in unique ways. In fact, people 65 and older make up just 13% of the population and yet they account for 30% of the prescriptions in this country.<sup>1</sup>

*What are some risks related to prescription medications?*

**Adverse Drug Events:** Older adults are at a higher risk for adverse drug events due to concurrent use of multiple medications, physiological changes, and difficulty managing medications.<sup>2</sup> These adverse drug events can result in hospitalization and even death.

**Prescription Drug Misuse:** According to the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment at the National Institutes on Aging, substance abuse among older adults is considered an invisible epidemic, with alcohol and prescription drug misuse affecting up to 17% of older Americans.<sup>3</sup> Prescription medications and alcohol often have harmful interactions. It is noteworthy that widowers over 75 have the highest rate of alcoholism in the US<sup>2</sup>.

**Prescription Drug Diversion:** Older adults may be also at risk of having medication taken by family members or other individuals suffering from prescription drug addiction. In 2005, the most common source of prescription medications was from a friend or relative for free.<sup>4</sup> This is especially relevant in Massachusetts where we are experiencing an opioid epidemic.

**Environmental Consequences:** According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "The ubiquitous use of pharmaceuticals (both prescribed and over the counter) has resulted in a relatively continuous discharge of pharmaceuticals and their metabolites into wastewater." It is difficult to assess the human health risks associated with this exposure (too few monitoring programs and/or comprehensive studies) and the WHO states that it's unlikely that exposure to low levels of pharmaceuticals would present adverse risk to human health. However, it's worth noting that this is still a matter of concern to many.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>1</sup> National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. <https://www.ncadd.org/about-addiction/seniors/alcohol-drug-dependence-and-seniors> Accessed 1/26/16

<sup>2</sup> Lynn, S. J., 2012;7(1) Adverse Drug Reactions in the Elderly, Am Nurs Today. Retrieved from: <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/758855> January 20, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Substance Abuse Among Older Adults: Tip 26, 1998

<sup>4</sup> Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network <http://www.fightrxabuse.org/topics/RxAbuse/aboutRxAbuse.htm> Accessed April 12, 2016

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, Information Sheet Pharmaceuticals in Drinking Water, [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/emerging/info\\_sheet\\_pharmaceuticals/en/](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/emerging/info_sheet_pharmaceuticals/en/) accessed April 12, 2016

**Solutions:** *What can be done?* The following strategies are needed to address the challenges older adults have around prescription medications. *Environmental strategies* such as medication disposal boxes for unwanted pain medications; *educational strategies* such as informing elders about the risk of adverse drug events<sup>6</sup>; and *policy strategies*, such as prescription monitoring programs, and hospitals limiting the amount of medication provided are all essential to addressing this issue.

**Environmental Strategies:** Permanent Waste Medication Kiosks where residents can properly dispose of expired or unneeded prescription drugs are an example of changing the environment to address the issue.



Permanent Waste Medication Sites	
Acton Police 371 Main St.	Lincoln Police 169 Lincoln Rd
Bedford Police. 2 Mudge Way	Littleton Police 509 Great Road
Boxborough Police 520 Mass. Ave.	Winchester Police 30 Mount Vernon St
Burlington Police 42 Center St	Woburn Police 25 Harrison Ave.
Carlisle Police 41 Lowell St	Wilmington Public Safety Bldg. 1 Adelaide St.
Concord Police 219 Walden St.	

**Policy Strategies:**

**Legislative Efforts:** In March of this year (2016), the Massachusetts House passed legislation that will limit first time prescriptions of opioids, require verbal screenings of all public school students and a host of other provisions related to education, treatment and prevention of drug addiction.<sup>7</sup>

**Prescription Monitoring Program (PMP):** Massachusetts collects prescribing and dispensing information on schedule II substances, those with the highest potential for abuse. As of January 1, 2011, all pharmacies must report prescription records and customer ID information for Schedules II-V. The PMP uses the data to determine trends, educate providers and the public and provide case information to regulatory and law enforcement agencies.<sup>8</sup>

**Education:**

Community efforts to address drug misuse are essential in making a positive impact. Burlington, Wilmington, Winchester, and Woburn all have substance abuse prevention coalitions. Coalitions engage in education, policy and environmental changes.

**Other Resources:**

- Sources for tips sheets for elders and their caregivers about prescription medications:
  - Medication Use Safety Training for Seniors: <http://www.mustforseniors.org/tips.jsp>
  - CHAMP (Collaboration for Homecare Advances in Management and Practice, Center for Home Care Policy and Research). [http://www.champ-program.org/page/101/geriatric-medication-management-toolkit#Intervention\\_Tools](http://www.champ-program.org/page/101/geriatric-medication-management-toolkit#Intervention_Tools)
  - Pillpack.com sorts and packages medications into individual dose packs (no fee beyond monthly co-pays).
- The following pharmacies deliver medications free of charge:
  - Winchester Pharmacy offers free delivery of medications. [Winchesterrx.com](http://Winchesterrx.com)
  - West Concord Pharmacy. [Westconcordpharmacy.com](http://Westconcordpharmacy.com)

To learn more about CHNA 15, visit [chna15.org](http://chna15.org).

<sup>6</sup> June 2015, Massachusetts Department of Health, Findings of the Opioid Task Force and Department of Public Health Recommendations on Priorities for Investments in Prevention, Intervention, Treatment and Recovery.

<sup>7</sup> Mass Live.com [http://www.masslive.com/politics/index.ssf/2016/03/massachusetts\\_house\\_limits\\_siz.html](http://www.masslive.com/politics/index.ssf/2016/03/massachusetts_house_limits_siz.html) accessed April 12, 2016

<sup>8</sup> White House Drug Control Update [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/state\\_profile-massachusetts.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/state_profile-massachusetts.pdf) accessed January 28, 2016