

# Geriatric Prescription Medication Misuse & Abuse: A Guide for Patients & Families

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Prescription medications can greatly improve quality of life for many older adults. However, some medications can also be misused or become habit-forming over time. Older adults may develop dependence on certain medications for sleep, anxiety, pain, or energy. Sometimes misuse happens unintentionally due to memory problems or confusion. Understanding the medications involved and recognizing warning signs can help families support safe medication use.

## Why Medication Misuse Can Occur in Older Adults

- Long-term use of medications that can cause dependence
- Taking higher doses than prescribed
- Using medications more often than directed
- Mixing medications with alcohol or other drugs
- Memory problems leading to accidental overuse
- Seeking relief from pain, anxiety, or insomnia

## Common Medication Categories to Watch For

### Benzodiazepines (Anxiety Medications)

These medications are sometimes prescribed for anxiety, panic, or sleep problems but can cause dependence and increase fall risk in older adults.

Examples:

- Alprazolam (Xanax)
- Lorazepam (Ativan)
- Diazepam (Valium)
- Clonazepam (Klonopin)
- Temazepam (Restoril)

### Opioids (Pain Medications)

Opioid medications are used to treat moderate to severe pain but can lead to dependence and overdose if misused.

Examples:

- Oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet)
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin, Norco)
- Morphine
- Fentanyl
- Tramadol

### Sleep Medications

Some sleep medications can cause confusion, falls, and dependence when used long-term.

Examples:

- Zolpidem (Ambien)
- Eszopiclone (Lunesta)
- Zaleplon (Sonata)
- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) – commonly found in over-the-counter sleep aids

### Stimulants / ADHD Medications

Stimulant medications are sometimes prescribed for ADHD or certain medical conditions but may be misused for energy or concentration.

Examples:

- Adderall (amphetamine salts)
- Ritalin (methylphenidate)
- Concerta (methylphenidate ER)
- Vyvanse (lisdexamfetamine)

## Warning Signs Caregivers May Notice

- Taking medications earlier or more often than prescribed
- Running out of medications too quickly
- Increasing sleepiness or sedation
- Confusion, falls, or memory changes
- Mood swings or irritability
- Visiting multiple doctors or pharmacies
- Hiding or guarding medications

## Health Risks of Medication Misuse in Older Adults

- Increased risk of falls and fractures
- Confusion or delirium
- Breathing problems with opioids or sedatives
- Memory impairment
- Medication interactions
- Dependence or withdrawal symptoms

## How Families Can Help

- Keep an updated medication list
- Use pill organizers or medication dispensing systems
- Monitor medication refill patterns
- Attend medical appointments when possible
- Encourage open conversations about medication use

## When to Speak With a Healthcare Provider

- Concern about medication overuse
- Sudden changes in behavior or alertness
- Frequent falls or confusion
- Requests for early refills
- Signs of withdrawal when medication is missed

## National Organizations & Resources


- ✓ National Institute on Drug Abuse

 [nida.nih.gov](https://nida.nih.gov)

- ✓ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

 1-800-662-HELP |  [samhsa.gov](https://samhsa.gov)

- ✓ National Council on Aging

 [ncoa.org](https://ncoa.org)

- ✓ Eldercare Locator

 1-800-677-1116 |  [eldercare.acl.gov](https://eldercare.acl.gov)

## Final Notes

- Medication misuse in older adults is often unintentional and related to medical needs.
- Early recognition can prevent serious health complications.
- Families and healthcare providers can work together to support safe medication use.