

Dementia Care: Effects of Medication on Persons with Dementia

Learner Workbook



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THE ROLE OF MEDICATION IN DEMENTIA CARE

Medications that our residents with dementia may take have different purposes. This may include:

- Medications that attempt to treat the underlying cause of the dementia. These medications may improve cognitive functioning but will not cure the disease. These medications have relatively few side effects.
- Medications that manage the behavioral manifestations of dementia. These medications potentially have more side effects than those medications which are used to treat the disease.

Our role as care providers is to know when medications are needed to manage behaviors. Medications should never be our first result. Safety is the key! An important question to ask is the behavior putting the resident or others in danger?

Another question you may consider, have you witnessed behaviors in your community that would be considered a danger to residents or staff? What behaviors have you observed?

Treat the Disease

There is no “magic pill”! No medication that is currently available will “cure” dementia. However, despite this discouraging reality, medications can be very helpful in the management of dementia and its related symptoms. Some newer medications can even help to improve cognition.

There are limited options in the first category. Unfortunately, there are not many medications that currently treat the actual disease that is causing dementia. So, what are the diseases that cause dementia?

Dementia, a broad term that refers to the person’s symptoms, such as: memory loss, language problems, and reasoning difficulty to name a few. There are various diseases that cause dementia.

The most common cause is known as Alzheimer's disease. Other causes include:

- Vascular Dementia
- Lewy Body Disease
- Infectious Conditions
- Frontal Lobe Dementia

Each of these diseases creates destruction of brain cells and leads to symptoms of dementia. Medications are used to treat or manage the destruction process of the brain cells.

Be aware of the following aspects of the first category of medications:

- These medications attempt to treat the underlying cause of dementia
- There are few medications available in this category
- Most of the medications in this category target Alzheimer's disease

These medications work by altering enzyme activity or neuroactivity in the person's brain to help restore normal brain function. They help to treat or manage the cause of the disease but they do not cure the person's symptoms permanently.

The potential improvement these medications are designed for include:

- Memory
- Reasoning
- Language
- Perception

As time progresses, the person's symptoms are prone to worsen. It is important that everyone involved be aware of what effect the medications are likely to have on the person with dementia.

Side Effects

All medications have the potential for side effects or adverse reactions. Common side effects for these medications used to treat the disease connected with dementia may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

Fortunately these medications are usually well tolerated with fewer side effects compared to medications in the second category.

Manage Behavioral Manifestations

Medications should never be our first choice when managing behavioral issues in dementia care. There are various more effective and appropriate measures we can use to manage challenging behaviors. However, there are times when medications become necessary.

Knowing when medications are needed to manage behaviors is the key. Questions you will want to ask in order to know when to result to medications include:

- Safety, safety, safety! Are the behaviors putting the resident or others in danger?
- Have you witnessed behaviors in our community that would be considered a danger to residents or staff? What behaviors have you observed?

Focus on safety. Are the behaviors of this resident so out of control, that he or she is becoming unsafe? Is he/she attacking other residents? Is he/she attempting to leave the building in the night?

There are numerous medications in the second category and many have been in use for over thirty years to treat conditions beyond dementia. These medications include:

- Antipsychotics
- Antidepressants
- Anxiolytics (Anxiety Medications)
- Mood Stabilizers

A resident may take these medications to help manage:

- Aggression
- Agitation
- Restlessness
- Pacing and wandering
- Depression
- Delusions/Hallucinations

Again, medications should be used as a last resort in managing these behaviors.

Antipsychotics

Antipsychotics are highly effective at managing psychosis. Symptoms are various and may include: psychosis and some forms of depression. In persons with dementia typically you will find symptoms of hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there), or delusions (false beliefs, such as paranoia).

The problem with these medications is they are sometimes overused to “control” behaviors. Overuse is a form of chemical restraint and not the purpose an antipsychotic medication should be used in an assisted living community. These medications should only be used when psychotic symptoms are present.

Be aware that antipsychotics can result in lethargy and sleepiness.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants are highly effective in treating depression. These medications can carry side effects but normally do not tend to be as numerous or severe as the side effects of antipsychotic medications.

How might you recognize that a resident is depressed? Some of the symptoms of depression may include:

- Loss of interest in favorite things
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Trouble making decisions
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Change in appetite or weight
- Short tempered/more irritable
- Anxious and worried
- Does not care about anything he/she used to care for



Anxiolytics (Anti-Anxiety)

Anxiolytics are anti-anxiety medications. These medications should generally be used cautiously with elder adults with dementia. They can be effective for short-term managing anxiety, but also may have long-term adverse effects. Residents can develop a tolerance to these medications and can require higher and higher doses. After time these medications may not work as well as they used to.

Anxiolytics may cause the resident to become lethargic or drowsy and act as a sedative.

Once again, medications are not our first choice in helping the resident with dementia.

Mood Stabilizers

A common mood stabilizer is Depakote. Depakote is originally for someone suffering from seizures.

Typically this medication is given when a person is developing the following behaviors:

- Agitation
- Restlessness
- Aggressiveness
- Etc

Benefits vs. Side Effects

As caregivers, you play an important role in communicating how residents are reacting to medications. A side effect or adverse reaction is any unwanted or undesirable effect of a medication. Let's now identify some side effects that we may see of medications prescribed to our residents with dementia.

- Lethargic and appear sedated
- Sleeping more than normal
- Falling asleep in unusual places
- Less interactive with care staff, visitors, family, etc
- Body tremors
- Shuffling gait when ambulating
- Limbs may become stiff or rigid
- Fatigue
- Pacing
- A drop in blood pressure (orthostatic hypotension) when the resident stands up
- "Pill rolling" or abnormal tongue movements (tardive dyskinesia)
- Anticholinergic effects such as dry mouth, dry eyes, constipation
- Stomach ache, diarrhea nausea, vomiting

Remember, you are at the front line in recognizing when a resident is experiencing side effects or adverse reactions. Always observe for, and communicate changes that you observe in your residents.

Every medication has the potential to cause side effects and adverse reactions. Here are some steps to help monitor/manage side effects:

1. Be aware of side effects
2. Monitor your residents (Get to know your residents. Watch for what is normal for each individual and what changes you may observe.)
3. Communicate
 - a. With other caregivers
 - b. Your supervisor
 - c. The resident's physician (which is the most important! The physician may need to make changes to the resident's medications.)
4. Follow Community protocol
5. Notify resident's family
6. Document
7. Follow-through
 - a. Physician instructions
 - b. Careful not to overlook medication changes
 - c. Follow Community policy

Managing medications in dementia care can be a demanding job. Always follow your community policies and state regulations. Never allow medications to be the first form of care used to manage challenging behaviors in residents with dementia. Although medications may be beneficial it is important to take into consideration the weight of the potential side effects or adverse reactions. Our goal is to ensure the highest quality of care for our residents.