

Older Australians taking multiple medicines may be putting their health at risk

15 July 2019, by Jess Reid

The number of Australians over the age of 70 taking five medicines or more a day has risen to nearly one million people and is increasing, according to a new study led by The University of Western Australia in collaboration with UNSW, Sydney. The study has been published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

The use of medicines among older Australians is common. However using five medicines or more concurrently can place people at risk of side effects, more frequent hospital admissions and falls.

UWA Centre for Optimisation of Medicines Dr. Amy Page, who led the study, said the researchers analyzed a 10 percent random sample of people eligible for medicines listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2017.

They found a 52 percent increase in the number of people taking five medicines or more between 2006 and 2017, rising to an estimated 935,240 people in 2017. People in their 80s were most likely to take five medicines or more a day.

Dr. Page said while the increase could be attributable to a growing aging population, it was clear that there was work to be done to ensure medication management balanced the potential for benefits against the potential for harm.

"The medicines we looked at do not include medicines purchased without a prescription such as vitamins, minerals, herbal supplements or medicines not listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, meaning that the estimates in the paper may be conservative," Dr. Page said. "The rates in comparable years are also much higher in Australia than in the US or the UK."

"There have been many awareness raising activities in recent times about the risks of taking

multiple medicines and there is evidence of poor health outcomes in [older people](#). However the number of older people taking multiple medicines has increased.

"Strategies to increase people's understanding of the potential risks involved in taking multiple medications are needed that target both health professionals and the public.

"Taking multiple medications may be necessary, but it needs to be carefully assessed by a medical professional and balanced against the potential risks."

Provided by University of Western Australia

APA citation: Older Australians taking multiple medicines may be putting their health at risk (2019, July 15) retrieved 2 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-older-australians-multiple-medicines-health.html>

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