

# Medication Issues

National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative Online Interactive Educational Module

## Key Takeaways

- Recognizing how pharmaceuticals, legal, and illegal, contribute to increased risks of abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- Identifying pharmaceutical issues including interactions of prescribed medications, natural medicines, and supplements.
- Building trust and creating a culturally-safe environment between providers and Indigenous patients.

## Medication Misuse and Abuse

- Pharmaceutical misuse, or prescription drug abuse, refers to taking a medication other than the prescribed way.
- Misuse also refers to taking someone else's prescription. This may be with or without the older adult's consent, even for a legitimate complaint such as pain.
- Misuse or abuse also refers to taking medication to feel euphoria or to "get high" or "wasted".
- These forms of abuse may take place by the older adult themselves. The misuse may also be initiated or forced by someone caring for the older adult.

## Types of Commonly Used Medications

- **Opioids** – are typically prescribed for pain. They include oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine, and many others. They can be addictive, and easily lead to an overdose if not taken as prescribed.
- **Depressants** – generally work by lessening the actions of the central nervous system. They include Valium, Xanax, Klonopin, Lunesta, and Ambien. Long term use can cause both psychological and physical dependence.
- **Stimulants** – are most often prescribed to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They can also be prescribed for weight loss, depression, and lethargy. Long term use can cause both psychological and physical dependence.

## Common Medication-Related Problems

- While medications can help with health and well-being, they can also cause problems for older or vulnerable adults.
- Many medications for nausea, nerve pain, or sleep disorders can cause confusion or memory problems. They can also influence balance.
- Problems can occur when the starting dose of a medication may be too high or too low.
- Healthcare providers should be cautious when prescribing new medications.
- Medication side effects can be more evident in older adults.
- Scheduling multiple medications over different time periods during the day and evening can result in problems such as missed medications or over medication.
- The cost of medications can be high, especially for those with limited finances.

## Warning Signs of Prescription Drug Abuse

- Different providers prescribing the same medication.
- Multiple pharmacies filling prescriptions for the same medication.
- Using more medication or taking it more often than prescribed.
- Behaving defensively or making excuses when asked about medication use.
- History of treatment for alcohol abuse, drug abuse, or addiction in the past.



## Tips for Managing Medications

- Keep a list of all medications, natural remedies, vitamins, and over the counter medications.
  - This includes tracking dosages.
  - Review this list with the healthcare provider at each visit.
- Read prescription labels carefully for instructions on how to take the medication.
- Make sure that the purpose of the medication is clearly written on the label.
- Read or review warning labels to know potential medication interactions and possible side effects.
- Tell the provider about any illegal drug use as this may have a major impact on their treatment, such as understanding possible interactions or adverse effects.

## Theft and Sales of Medication

- Older adults are the most vulnerable to drug theft.
- Most prescription medication thefts are committed by someone the victim knows and who has access to the home. Many older adults are hesitant to acknowledge, much less, report a trusted friend or family member to the authorities.
- If medications are stolen, the older adult may face increased pain and health risks due to being under-medicated.

## Prevention of Medication Theft

- **Target hardening** – Homes can be made more secure by using locks for doors and windows. Adequate lighting also wards off theft, making the home a less likely target for strangers.
- **Medication tracking** – Medications need to be counted, tracked, and secured between doses. Keeping medications in a safe, lockbox, or locking cabinet creates more security.
- **Security** – If older adults have difficulty using combination locks or remembering where a padlock key is located, a trustworthy friend or family member can store the bulk of their medication. Advise the older adult to properly dispose of unneeded or expired medication.

## Establishing Trust with Native American Older Adults

- Respect, listening, and observing is essential when working with Native American older adults. Knowledge of the history and culture is also important.
- A culturally safe environment that is free of racism and discrimination is important. Cultural safety includes cultural humility, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence.

- Provider's attitude should include the willingness to be open (feeling willing is not enough, you have to transmit it to the patient, e.g. "I am unfamiliar with your culture. I would like to learn, and hope you'll consider sharing with me.").
- Providers must show regard and respect in a way your patient can perceive it. Ask patient about their language preference, and how to pronounce words in their language.
- It is important to build trust with the person before asking questions about spiritual and cultural practices and beliefs. Some questions about spiritual history that may be asked during an office visit include:

- » **How do you identify ethnically or racially?**
- » **Do you identify with a specific tribe?**
- » **Do you have any spiritual beliefs you are comfortable sharing that you would like me to be aware of?**
- » **Are you comfortable sharing any part of your healing or ceremony practices with me?**



Keck School of  
Medicine of USC



*"This document was completed for the National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative at the University of North Dakota and National Center for Elder Abuse at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California and is supported in part by a grant (No. 90IERC0002 & 90ABRC0001-04) from the Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Grantees carrying out projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Therefore, points of view or opinions do not necessarily represent official Administration on Aging or DHHS policy."*

The NIEJI project has been retired, but they have granted NIIJI permission to share materials.  
For the most current information, please contact Wendelin Hume, PhD at  
221 Centennial Drive, Stop 8050 • Grand Forks, ND 58202-8050  
• Phone: (701) 777-4001 • Email: [admin@nijii.org](mailto:admin@nijii.org) • Web: [nijii.org](http://nijii.org)