



SECURITY BULLETIN

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The Endangered Elderly: Preventing Prescription Abuse

Until recently, the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs by the elderly community has been overshadowed by the illegal drug use common to the younger generations. We often hear about the dangers of methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin. However, the abuse of certain prescription medications can be just as dangerous and deadly as illicit drugs. Opioids, in particular, include a group of drugs that are common to the senior population and if not properly managed can lead to addiction, overdose and death.

Elderly individuals use prescription medications approximately three times more often as the general population. We know that in the majority of cases, seniors take a variety of medications prescribed by a doctor for legitimate reasons. Prescription medications can improve the lives of the aging community by doing everything from lowering blood pressure to relieving chronic pain.

Opioids are frequently prescribed to relieve aches and pains associated with long-term injuries, chronic illnesses and acute pain. You may know these opioids better as Oxycontin (oxycodone), Percodan (aspirin/oxycodone), Percocet (Tylenol/oxycodone), Vicodin (Tylenol/hydrocodone), Darvon (propoxyphene), Dilaudid (hydromorphone) and even morphine. When properly prescribed under the watchful eye of a doctor, opioids can provide the health benefits as designed to relieve pain and accelerate recovery. Unfortunately, the abuse of these same drugs can have devastating effects,

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especially to senior citizens. Abuse or misuse of prescription drugs is second only to alcohol abuse in the 65 and over population.

Abuse on the Rise

The 2017 Health Care Agency and Sheriff-Coroner report on Drug and Alcohol Morbidity and Mortality in Orange County shows an alarming increase in prescription abuse among seniors. In a three-year study from 2013 to 2015, the most common cause of death was accidental overdose from prescription opioids. Seniors aged 55 to 64 years had the highest percentage of overdose deaths and those aged 65 to 74 years were a disturbing third. For those hospitalized due to a drug and alcohol related disorder, alcohol dependence was the leading contributor. Opioid dependence was the second leading cause of hospitalization. Of those hospitalized due to opioid abuse, seniors 55 to 64 years ranked second only behind those in the 45 to 54 year range.

So why is prescription drug abuse a specific threat to the aged community? Seniors take more

Did You Know?

The Florence Sylvester Memorial Senior Center offers a “Brown Bag” day to review all medications with a consulting pharmacist with the Orange County Health Care Agency. Call to find out when the next event is scheduled: [949-380-0155](tel:949-380-0155). The center is located at 23721 Moulton Parkway, Laguna Hills, CA 92653.

prescription drugs, so they are more vulnerable to misuse, abuse and addiction. Seniors often take multiple medications, and for a prolonged duration of time. Many other factors compound the issue, such as combining prescription medications with over-the-counter drugs, dietary supplements and alcohol consumption. Add in age-related changes to drug metabolism, overall poor health, a weakened immune system, lack of sleep and loss of appetite, and the potential for adverse reactions increases significantly.

The Road to Recovery

Seniors who fall victim to prescription abuse are not necessarily inclined to seek help. On one hand, they might minimize their reliance on powerful opioids and argue that the medications are prescribed by a doctor and therefore necessary for their health and recovery. On the other hand, a person may be too ashamed to acknowledge they have a problem and may fear losing their personal freedoms and independence.

To prevent or minimize the risk of prescription abuse, seniors should consider the following:

- Keep your health provider fully advised of the symptoms you are experiencing.
- Ensure your primary health provider has approved all medications you are taking, including over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements.
- Be aware of potential interactions with other prescriptions as well as alcohol.
- Become educated on the medication and know the risks involved in prolonged use of opioids.
- Take your medications exactly as prescribed.
- Take prescription medications at the correct time of day and take them with food if it is advised.
- Understand the drugs' side effects (drowsiness, light-headedness, nausea).
- Don't use other people's prescriptions.

Seeking Help

The Laguna Woods Village Social Services Department is available for any Resident in the Village who might be struggling with a dependence problem or who knows of someone who might need assistance.

“Many of the prescription drugs older adults take to alleviate pain are highly addictive and can lead to dependency or misuse,” said Susan McInerney, Manager of the Laguna Woods Village Social Services Department. “If you find yourself in this situation, please reach out for help. The Social Services Department is comprised of a staff of highly educated Social Workers with the knowledge, referrals and resources to help you take the next steps to recovery.”

Older adults who do fall victim to prescription abuse do so by accident and the Social Services team is ready to provide compassionate assistance. Please feel free to stop by the Social Services office on the first floor of the Community Center or call the office at [949-597-4267](tel:949-597-4267).

- Do not stop or change a dosing regimen without first discussing it with your doctor.
- Make a medications list, both prescribed and over-the-counter medicine, and regularly review with your doctor.
- Consider using a pill organizer to stay on schedule.
- Store prescriptions in a safe location.
- Properly dispose of unused medications. You can bring unused medication in a baggie to Laguna Woods City Hall (24264 El Toro Road) Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call [949-639-0500](tel:949-639-0500) for more information.

Signs of Prescription Drug Abuse

Signs of prescription abuse and misuse can mirror other common signs of aging. For this reason and if a senior is not forthcoming, it can be difficult to diagnose a problem. Warning signs include:

- Confusion or forgetfulness
- Depression, anxiety or mental health problems
- Lack of balance
- Memory loss
- Withdrawn or angry
- Shaky hands
- Slurred speech
- Unexplained bruises and repeated falls
- Unkempt appearance
- Weight loss