Polypharmacy: General Deprescribing Information

For Facility Staff

What is polypharmacy?
- Polypharmacy is the use of multiple medications by a patient, usually 5 or more medications.
- An alternative definition of polypharmacy is the use of unnecessary medications by a patient.

What is deprescribing?
Deprescribing is a shared decision-making process between a health care provider and a patient and/or caregiver to reduce, taper, or stop medications with the goal of managing polypharmacy to improve patient outcomes while treating the disease and managing symptoms.

Why is deprescribing important/What are the risks of polypharmacy?
- Taking medications may be necessary for health, improving symptoms or prolonging life expectancy. However, over time the benefits and risks of certain medications may change.
- The risk of polypharmacy may include: inappropriate prescribing, drug-drug interactions, drug-disease interactions, adverse drug events, morbidity (e.g., anorexia, delirium, falling), hospitalization, and even mortality of nursing home residents.

How does deprescribing fit with my patient’s goals of care?
The deprescribing process will identify potential medications that can be reduced or discontinued based on the patient’s care goals, current level of functioning, life expectancy, values, and preferences.

How can I advocate for my patients who would like to stop some of their medications?
When passing medications, pay attention to the following and make an effort to talk with the prescriber:
- Are there concerns that a medication is not helping a resident?
- Have you or the patient/family noticed side effects of a medication?
- Is the patient unable to take the medication as prescribed? An example of this would be a resident with advanced dementia and COPD who is no longer able to use their inhaler properly.
- Can you help the patient manage their symptoms without medication?
- Have you heard the resident or family member express that they feel like they do not need a medication? Do they often refuse to take it?
- Have the symptoms, for which medicines were initiated, resolved?
- Communicate the patient’s willingness to stop some of their medications with their healthcare provider and family or surrogate decision makers when appropriate.