



Raising Awareness of Medication Overload

Issue Briefs

Implementing Prescription Checkups

Raising Awareness

Improving Information

Educating & Training

Reducing Industry Influence

Key Takeaways

- Many policymakers, health care leaders, and patients are unaware of the growing public health crisis of medication overload, which puts millions of older adults at risk of preventable harm and premature death.
- Raising awareness about the dangers of medication overload could encourage discussions between patients and their clinicians about how to avoid, reduce, or stop unnecessary medications.
- Health care professional groups, patient advocates, health care institutions and organizations, government agencies, and policymakers should jointly develop effective tools and strategies for raising awareness.
- For greatest impact, awareness campaigns need to educate the public, older patients, their families and caregivers, and all health care professionals who prescribe and monitor medications.

America's Harmful Culture of Prescribing

Most Americans see the use of multiple medications as a natural part of aging, and drugs can offer patients many benefits. But each additional drug a person takes increases the risk of suffering serious, sometimes even deadly, harm. Despite the well-documented harms of medication overload, most policymakers, health care leaders, and patients are unaware of the severity of this issue.

Clinicians and patients view medications as “quick fixes” for health problems, and a stay in the hospital or visit to the doctor usually results in new prescriptions. Pervasive direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising perpetuates the idea that there is a “pill for every ill” while downplaying medication dangers. This culture of prescribing is contributing to a public health crisis, particularly among older adults. The widespread harm and costs of medication overload call for a multipronged effort to counter drug advertising and the culture of prescribing and to raise awareness of this crisis among the general public, patients, and health care professionals.



Every day, **750** Americans age 65 and older are hospitalized due to a serious side effect associated with medication use.

The Threat of Medication Overload and Adverse Drug Events (ADEs)

Medication overload occurs when a person is taking multiple medications that may pose a greater chance of harm than benefit.

Harm from medication overload includes delirium, falls, strokes, and other events that can be life-threatening.



5 million older adults sought medical attention for ADEs in 2018



42% of older adults take 5 or more prescription medications



There was a 200% increase in polypharmacy over 20 years



280,000 hospitalizations in 2018 due to ADEs



\$62 billion in unnecessary hospitalizations over 10 years



150,000 premature deaths in next 10 years due to ADEs

Raising Awareness in the General Public

A national awareness campaign directed at the public is needed to alert people to the dangers of medication overload. This campaign's goal should be to foster conversations between patients and their clinicians about how to avoid unnecessary prescriptions and stop, or “deprescribe,” unnecessary or potentially harmful medications. For such conversations to occur, patients, their caregivers, and their health care providers must first be aware of the problem. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) and other institutions have used public awareness campaigns to combat public health threats (e.g., tobacco use and the opioid epidemic). A public awareness campaign targeting medication overload should use similar tactics, including securing significant funding, forming partnerships, developing focused messaging and branding, using multiple channels of communication, and continually evaluating and refining the campaign. Like other successful public awareness campaigns, one focused on medication overload should create a sense of urgency and give the audience a clear call to action.

Focusing on Patients

More targeted educational initiatives may offer the most effective means to increase awareness among those most at risk. These efforts should focus on older patients who are taking a specific class of drugs, a large number of medications, or any drug for a long period of time. Among the medications that have been shown to be particularly dangerous for older adults are blood thinners, diabetes medication, anti-anxiety drugs, sleep medications, and opioids. These drugs should be priorities for patient-focused awareness campaigns. Such campaigns should aim to alert patients and caregivers to the dangers associated with drugs they are taking and encourage them to start conversations with their health care providers. Patient-focused awareness campaigns have had extremely good results in Canada (e.g., the EMPOWER trial in Quebec). Launching similar campaigns in the U.S. could have a more immediate impact than a widespread public awareness campaign—and for less cost.



Targeting Health Care Professionals



Campaigns that focus on the positive aspects of deprescribing and **acknowledge clinicians as “champions” for their patients’ health** are likely to be more effective than negative campaigns.

Targeting health care professionals—including physicians, nurses, clinical pharmacists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and pharmacy technicians—is essential to reducing medication overload. Health professions education rarely provides a thorough understanding of the impact of medications on older adults and hardly touches on deprescribing. In order for health care professionals to have conversations with patients about medication overload and deprescribing, they must be aware of the dangers of prescribing multiple medications and know how to deprescribe when necessary. The goal of targeting health care professionals should be not only to increase awareness of the harms of medication overload but also to emphasize the need for better prescribing and regular prescription checkups. Campaigns that focus on the positive aspects of deprescribing and acknowledge clinicians as “champions” for their patients’ health are likely to be more effective than negative campaigns. Prescriber-focused awareness campaigns could be delivered through a variety of channels, including continuing education, talks at professional meetings, and social media, and can be tailored to various health care settings.

Taking Action to Eliminate Medication Overload

No one group has formal responsibility for addressing the national epidemic of medication overload. Health care professional groups, patient advocates, health care institutions and organizations, government agencies, and policymakers must form partnerships and take action to make the public, patients, and prescribers aware of the dangers of medication overload. A first step would be for a national organization, such as the National Academy of Medicine, to convene a consensus group to issue a call to action and blueprint for other relevant organizations. Other groups, such as health care professional societies, the CDC, AARP, and the National Institutes of Health will need to be involved. Without such a coalition, progress on eliminating medication overload will be slow or nonexistent, leaving millions of older adults at risk of serious harm.



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This issue brief is part of a project funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and conducted by the Lown Institute. A report, *Medication Overload: America’s Other Drug Problem*, quantifies the growing harm older Americans face from taking too many medications. The Lown Institute’s subsequent publication, *National Action Plan for Eliminating Medication Overload*, provides detailed descriptions of our recommendations and citations for this issue brief.