

## **All these medications!**

By Angus Campbell

Many seniors have several chronic conditions for which they are taking medications. These prescriptions can be for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, cancer, mental illness, chronic pain, and a wide range of other conditions. Medications are often essential to control symptoms and maintain health, and they often enable us to live productive lives. Taking a large number of medications, however, can be risky.

Please realize that I am not a medical professional; it is necessary for everyone to check with their physician, nurse practitioner, or pharmacist before stopping or changing medications.

Taking more than 5 medications is known as polypharmacy, and 66% of Canadians over the age of 65 are in that group. You may be surprised to learn that 27% of Canadian seniors are taking at least 10 medications. Another group for which polypharmacy is common is those living with disabilities.

The more medication one takes, the greater the chances of harmful side effects, drug interactions, falls and fractures, memory and other cognitive problems, and hospitalization. In general, polypharmacy can result in a poorer quality of life and brings a higher risk of injury or death.

The Canadian Deprescribing Network examines the risks of polypharmacy. They point out that drugs may have unpredictable effects when they interact with each other. Medications for one disease can also have unexpected effects on other medical conditions the person may have. Because of these potential negative consequences, the Network emphasizes the need to deprescribe drugs that are no longer benefiting a person or that may actually be causing harm.

The Canadian Deprescribing Network reports that those over 65 are at greater risk from polypharmacy than younger people. Women too are more likely than men to be prescribed risky medications, and they are more susceptible to harmful effects of drugs due in part to their biology and physiology.

To help seniors and caregivers navigate the often unfamiliar world of medications, Caregivers Nova Scotia, together with a community pharmacist, offers a Safe Medicines workshop throughout the province, at no cost to those attending. It looks at the safe use of medicines at home and pays special attention to the caregiver's role in administering and managing medications for their care recipients.

You viewed this article on the Caregivers Nova Scotia website. They can be reached at 902.421.7390, toll free at 1.877.488.7390, or at [www.CaregiversNS.org](http://www.CaregiversNS.org).

*Angus Campbell is the Executive Director of Caregivers Nova Scotia Association. He sits on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Frailty Network and of the Nova Scotia Hospice Palliative Care Association.*