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Over the counter drugs - Advantages and risks of self-management of OTC drugs in older adult patients

B Neelima

GIET School of Pharmacy, India

Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines are drugs you can buy without a prescription. The number of over-the-counter (OTC) medications is increasing as more prescription medications are being switched to OTC status. Many older adults rely on self-management of medications to treat common medical conditions such as the common cold, pain, diarrhea, and constipation. Self medication is becoming an increasingly important area within healthcare. It moves patients towards greater independence in making decisions about management of minor illnesses, thereby promoting empowerment. Self medication also has advantages for healthcare systems as it facilitates better use of clinical skills, increases access to medication and may contribute to reducing prescribed drug costs associated with publicly funded health programmes. However, self medication is associated with risks such as misdiagnosis, use of excessive drug dosage, prolonged duration of use, drug interactions and polypharmacy. This article reviews the major side effects of common OTC medications and how to recognize these adverse effects, and provides health care professionals with information to offer to older adults and their caregivers about safe OTC medication use.

vysu233@live.com