

Medications and memory impairment

Q. How much effect do medications taken for other diseases have on memory?

A. A great deal. As we age our bodies change in composition. (Has anyone not yet noticed this?) Many of these changes can affect the way we tolerate medication side effects. The other thing that changes with aging is our brains cognitive reserve declines; that is the amount of stress on the brain that will cause someone to become confused or delirious is lessened. There are many medications and other drugs (such as alcohol) that we use for the benefit of the side effect itself; for instance using Benadryl for sleep induction works simply because drowsiness is a side effect of this medicine.

If a young person's brain is put to sleep, so to speak, what effect should we expect on an older adult? Other medications that can commonly cause memory impairment even in normal older adults are: pain medications (narcotic and non-narcotic), antihistamines (including Benadryl as already mentioned), blood pressure medications (especially older medications like clonidine and reserpine), Parkinson's medications, Digoxin, anti-depressants (especially older medications such as amitriptyline or imipramine), Lithium, antipsychotics (such as Haldol or Mellaril), anti-anxiety medications, sleeping pills and even some anti-reflux medications (such as Tagamet or Pepcid) can cause problems in some people. As a physician I usually look at medications as the first cause for memory or other cognitive disorders, or as a cause for increasing problems in someone with an underlying dementia.