

# Poly pharmacy: a guide for staff

## What is poly pharmacy?

Poly pharmacy is when a person is taking 4 or more medications. It is often more common for a person with a learning disability as the person is more likely to have complex and multiple needs.

It is also often seen in older people as when we age, our health can begin to decline which can require more medication – or can be perceived to require more medication. It's also an issue as when we age our bodies often can't cope with multiple medications, leading to negative impacts both physically and mentally.

## Why is poly pharmacy a problem?

When 4 or more medications are prescribed and taken, the side effects of each medication and how they will interact with each other cannot be known for sure. Although there is a possibility that each medication will work independently for the issue or health condition it is prescribed for, there is also the possibility that serious underlying problems could develop that the person or staff team may or may not be aware of because of the amount of ingredients within the medication.

Poly pharmacy can have serious implications on a person's quality of life. For example, if drowsiness is a side effect experienced as a result of taking multiple medications, a person could experience more falls resulting in serious injury. Additionally, a side effect could be either a loss or increase of appetite, leaving a person to either lose or gain weight without apparent justification.

## Why is poly pharmacy more of a problem for people with a learning disability?

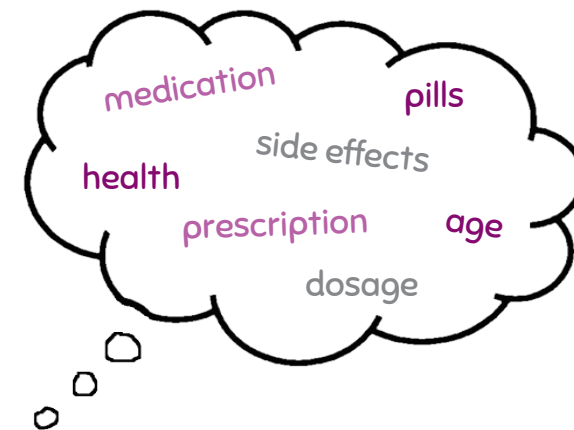
People with a learning disability are more likely to have complex health conditions, including diabetes, epilepsy, dementia and dysphasia. To ensure a person can continue to live well with these conditions, medication can be prescribed, but this often leads to poly pharmacy.

Additionally, someone with a learning disability may not have the communication ability, or confidence, to question a prescription given by a doctor or medical professional or may not be able to recognise when unfamiliar side effects occur.

It then becomes important for us as staff members to question the medication a person is prescribed and to advocate alongside the person.



# Top tips for taking action against poly pharmacy



## 1 Make sure prescribed medication is constantly reviewed

When attending a health appointment with someone you support, take a list of the medication they are currently taking with you and go through it with the doctor, nurse, pharmacist or other medical professional, involving the person you support as much as possible. Pharmacists in particular are a great source of information and are good for getting a second opinion. As we know, it is unlikely that health appointments will be carried out by the same medical professional each time, so ensure you are equipped with the information you need to update them if necessary.

## 2 Keep an eye on short-term medication

If the person you support is prescribed medication for a short-term health condition or illness, make sure the medication is not taken for longer than necessary.

## 3 Communicate between health specialists and GPs

If the person you support has additional care given by a medical specialist, make sure they are also aware of any existing medication before prescribing anything new. The person's GP should also be kept informed.

## 4 Question side effects

It's important that you don't just take side effects of new or existing medication as 'what's supposed to happen'. If the person you are supporting becomes unwell or experiences changes to their health or behaviour, keep a record of everything you are noticing and make a health appointment or specific medication review appointment.

## 5 Keep dosage low

If a person does need to be on multiple medications, make sure the dosage is no higher than it needs to be for the medication to be effective.

## 6 Involve the person you support

Remember that the person you are supporting should be involved in all aspects of their health needs, support and care. If the person does not verbally communicate, ensure you find alternative ways to keep the person informed of any medication changes. Be creative in how you make sure the person is able to let you or another member of staff know if new side effects occur or if side effects become worse or different.

*If you have any questions or would like some advice, contact MacIntyre's Specialist Health Advisor, Sarah Ormston: [sarah.ormston@macintyrecharity.org](mailto:sarah.ormston@macintyrecharity.org) or 01908 230100*

*A big thank you to Beth Britton for being a source of advice for this article. Beth has also written a blog about poly pharmacy, which you can read here: [d4dementia.blogspot.co.uk/2017/03/another-pill-wont-matter-will-it.html](http://d4dementia.blogspot.co.uk/2017/03/another-pill-wont-matter-will-it.html)*

