

H-CARDD snapshot



Adults with developmental disabilities are at increased risk of adverse side effects due to the use of multiple medications

What is this research about?

Adults with developmental disabilities have poorer health than those without developmental disabilities. For example, they are more likely to have diabetes and asthma, and are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health problem. As a result, these adults are often dispensed multiple medications.

However, using multiple medications at the same time can be harmful. Adults with developmental disabilities may react differently to medications than the general population because of differences in their central nervous system, or because of problems like epilepsy or metabolic disorders. A further challenge is that it can be difficult for these adults to report side-effects or discomfort resulting from a medication.

What did the researchers do?

The Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) program explored medication use among adult Ontarians with developmental disabilities. The researchers looked at how age, sex, neighbourhood income, place of residence, and region are related to the use of multiple medications.

What you need to know

Adults with developmental disabilities are dispensed many medications, which puts them at risk for adverse effects. These adults and their caregivers need to be educated on how to use medications and monitor their side-effects. Adopting clinical guidelines is strongly encouraged: indication, dosage and effectiveness of all medications should be reviewed every three months.

What did the researchers find?

Nearly one out of every two adults with developmental disabilities was dispensed multiple medications at the same time, with 20% of them taking five or more medications at once. Older adults, women, and those with many health problems were more likely to receive multiple medications. One third of people who took five or more medications didn't have regular follow-up visits with the same family physician.

Adults with developmental disabilities were most commonly dispensed medications for mental health or behavioural problems. Antipsychotic medications were the most common. One in five adults dispensed antipsychotics received two at the same time. This puts them at risk for adverse reactions, including death.

How can you use this research?

Adopting clinical guidelines on medication use is strongly encouraged for adults with developmental disabilities. Guidelines include the regular review of the date of initiation, indication, dosages and effectiveness of all medications (e.g., three months). Healthcare providers should monitor typical and atypical signs of adverse effects. Adults with development disabilities require complex supports. A team-based approach, that spans different sectors, is needed to improve the quality and coordination of these supports. It's important that these adults and their caregivers are educated on how to use medications and on how to monitor their side-effects.

About the researchers

This Research Snapshot is based on the sixth chapter of H-CARDD's resource [The Atlas on the Primary Care of Adults with Developmental Disabilities in Ontario](#) (available on www.hcardd.ca). The chapter was led by Dr. Virginie Cobigo, Clinical Psychologist, Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa, and Senior Researcher at the Centre for Educational and Community Services.

H-CARDD's partners in the creation of The Atlas include the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Surrey Place Centre, the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, the University of Ottawa and Queen's University, as well as the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

virginie.cobigo@uottawa.ca

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About H-CARDD

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) is a research program whose primary goal is to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services. H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, and health care providers. H-CARDD is funded by the Partnerships for Health System Improvement Program of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Health Systems Research Fund of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

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Health Care Access Research
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