



DARK SIDE OF MEDICINE



MEDICINE SAFETY SERIES

MS-09

Understanding Polypharmacy

A guide to understanding the use of multiple medicines and how medicine reviews can support safe and effective treatment.

darksideofmedicine.org

© Deborah Mann 2026

Version 1.0



What is Polypharmacy?

Polypharmacy means taking multiple medicines at the same time. It is common in people with long-term health conditions and is not necessarily a problem when medicines are appropriate and regularly reviewed.

Why Does Polypharmacy Occur?

- Multiple health conditions
- Long-term conditions
- Medicines added over time
- Preventive treatments
- Ageing and complex health needs

Appropriate and Problematic Polypharmacy

Appropriate polypharmacy occurs when medicines are evidence-based, beneficial and regularly reviewed. Problematic polypharmacy may occur when medicines are no longer needed, cause side effects, or increase treatment burden.



Why Reviews Matter

- Are all medicines still necessary?
- Are benefits outweighing risks?
- Could medicines be interacting?
- Are side effects affecting quality of life?
- Could treatment be simplified?

Understanding the Prescribing Cascade

Sometimes side effects from one medicine may be mistaken for a new health condition, leading to additional medicines being prescribed. This is known as a prescribing cascade.

Shared Decision-Making

Patients and carers can support medicine safety by keeping records, attending reviews, asking questions and reporting concerns.

Medicine Safety Tip

Polypharmacy is not simply about the number of medicines. The focus should be on whether treatment remains safe, effective, appropriate and regularly reviewed.

Related Resources

MS-04 Medicine Review Preparation Pack
MS-06 Medicine Timeline
MS-10 Understanding the Prescribing Cascade
MS-11 Understanding Medicine Doses

Polypharmacy Monitoring Record

Use this page to keep an overview of medicines taken for different conditions and how they are working.
Update it when a medicine or dose changes, or before a medicine review.

Medicine	What I take it for	Dose	When started	Benefit / effect	Problems / side effects	Who reviews it / next review

Changes over time

Note medicines started or stopped, dose changes, new symptoms, side effects, changes in benefit, or a review that is due.