



DARK SIDE OF MEDICINE



MEDICINE SAFETY SERIES

MS-10

Understanding the Prescribing Cascade

A guide to understanding how side effects can sometimes lead to additional medicines being prescribed.

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Version 1.0



What is a Prescribing Cascade?

A prescribing cascade occurs when a side effect of a medicine is mistaken for a new medical condition and an additional medicine is prescribed to treat the new symptom.

A Simple Example

Medicine A → Side Effect → Mistaken for New Condition → Medicine B

This can continue if the additional medicine causes another side effect that is also treated as a new condition.

Why Can Prescribing Cascades Occur?

Side effects can resemble medical conditions, symptoms may develop gradually, and complex health needs can make causes difficult to identify.

Common Warning Signs

- New symptoms after starting a medicine
- Symptoms after a dose increase
- Increasing numbers of medicines over time
- Side effects affecting daily life
- Uncertainty about why a medicine was prescribed



Questions You May Wish to Ask

- Could this symptom be related to a medicine?
- Did the symptom begin after a medicine started?
- Did the symptom begin after a dose change?
- Could this be a side effect?
- Would a medicine review be helpful?
- Could treatment be simplified?

Why Medicine Reviews Matter

Medicine reviews can help identify side effects, interactions, duplicate treatments, unnecessary medicines and opportunities to simplify treatment.

The Role of Patients and Carers

Patients and carers are often the first to notice changes. Keeping records and sharing observations can support medicine safety.

Medicine Safety Tip

Not every new symptom is caused by a medicine, but when symptoms appear after starting a medicine or changing a dose it is reasonable to discuss whether medicines could be contributing.

Related Resources

MS-02 Raising Concerns About a Medicine
MS-04 Medicine Review Preparation Pack
MS-09 Understanding Polypharmacy
MS-11 Understanding Medicine Doses