

The Dangers of SSRI Combination Therapy

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There have been a substantial number of changes to the pharmaceutical market in recent years and these changes have had a dramatic impact on the availability of drug therapy and ultimately quality of life. Among these changes is the expansion of options within a drug category as new drugs are discovered and brought to market along with the ever-increasing availability of generic products. With the benefit of therapeutic options associated with the expansion of the market, comes the potential increase in therapeutic duplication.

Therapeutic duplication occurs when the same person uses two drugs from the same therapeutic class, at the same time. It is routine to have a patient on more than one medication within the same class while tapering from one medication and starting another. This process can take as long as two months, but after that weaning period, it is generally inadvisable to maintain a patient on duplicative therapies because it is rare that two drugs from the same category with the same mechanism of action are needed to treat a medical condition. Sometimes therapeutic duplication results when two doctors are prescribing medications for the same person. These providers may not be aware that the patient is receiving care for the same condition from another physician. It can also result when a doctor changes from one medication to another within the same therapeutic class and the patient is not aware that they are to discontinue one of the agents. In either situation, the individual may end up unnecessarily taking two drugs with similar actions, leading to potentially serious side effects.

One of the therapy classes that have been identified as problematic in regards to duplication of therapy is the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs). Patients receiving multiple antidepressants with the same or similar mechanisms of action are likely to experience increased side effects with little or no increase in efficacy. In fact, it is possible for the drugs to compete, interfering with the efficacy of either or both drugs.

In addition, ingestion of multiple SSRIs has been associated with serotonin syndrome. Serotonin syndrome encompasses a range of clinical findings from mild to life threatening. In mild cases, the patient may present with tachycardia, shivering, diaphoresis, mydriasis, intermittent tremor or myoclonus, as well as hyperreflexia. Moderate cases involve vital-sign abnormalities such as tachycardia, hypertension, and hyperthermia along with physical findings such as mydriasis, hyperactive bowel sounds, and diaphoresis. These patients may also have changes in mental status including mild agitation or hypervigilance and slightly pressured speech. Severe serotonin syndrome is manifested by severe hypertension and tachycardia that may abruptly deteriorate into frank shock and possibly death. The onset of symptoms of serotonin syndrome is usually quite rapid. The clinical findings often occur within minutes after a change in medication with approximately 60% of patients presenting within 6 hours of initial use, overdose or dosage change. Serotonin syndrome is not thought to resolve spontaneously as long as the precipitating agents continue to be administered.

In an effort to reduce adverse drug events caused by duplication of therapy, Care Choices has implemented a Safety Management retrospective DUR program for specific targeted therapy classes including the SSRIs. This program identifies members that may be receiving duplicate therapies and sends a communication to each physician who prescribed one of these agents for the patient along with a pharmacy profile. This program is not only designed to reduce adverse drug events, it also

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improves the coordination of care between primary care and behavioral health practitioners by alerting providers to other therapies the patient is receiving and encourages open discussion with the patient and all providers of care.

In addition to the retrospective DUR program outlined above, Care Choices providers also have access to the Express Scripts' physician website. Express-Scripts.com for Physicians is a tool that allows providers to view patient prescription history for the previous 12 months for all of their patients with Care Choices pharmacy benefits. The prescription history will display all retail and mail order prescription claims for that member and will allow the provider to identify all other physicians prescribing for that patient. Armed with this information, the physician is able to better assess the pharmacologic management of the patient and identify potential areas of concern to reduce drug related problems and optimize patient care.