

Drug cocktails that put elderly at risk

Study warns mixing medication may be fatal

HUNDREDS of thousands of elderly patients who rely on a cocktail of drugs could be condemning themselves to an early death, a major study warns.

Common prescription and over-the-counter medications including treatment for heart disease, dementia, painkillers,

By **Sophie Borland**
Health Reporter

allergy remedies and sleeping pills can be extremely harmful if more than one is taken at the same time.

A study of 13,000 elderly patients has found that those relying on two or more of these drugs were three times more likely to die within two

years than those not taking any at all. They were also more at risk of suffering memory loss and concentration problems which may affect their ability to drive or carry out household chores.

Doctors last night warned patients not to panic and said it was crucial that they did not stop taking any medication purely on the basis of these findings.

Researchers from East Anglia

University looked at more than 80 drugs known to cause 'anticholinergic effects', which mean they can cause certain side effects including dilating pupils, a dry mouth and constipation. These include warfarin, used for heart disease, the painkiller codeine, Piriton allergy tablets, the antidepressant Seroxat and the sleeping pill Nytol.

The scientists looked at the effects of these drugs on 13,000 patients over 65 over a two-year period from 1991 to 1993.

Their findings, published in the American Geriatrics Society journal, showed that patients taking more than one of these drugs were three times more likely to die early than those not taking any at all.

A fifth of patients taking more than one of the drugs were dead within two years compared to 7 per cent of those not on any. And people taking several of the drugs had a 4 per cent worse score in key tests to check the function of their brain.

According to the researchers, these patients may feel more confused,

'A serious effect on mortality'

have memory problems and even find it difficult to drive.

Nearly half of the elderly patients in the study were taking one or more of the at-risk drugs, the study found.

The researchers say that across Britain, hundreds of thousands are probably taking a cocktail of these drugs, putting themselves at risk.

They warned that the elderly - particularly those with dementia - were particularly at risk as they are more likely to be taking several drugs for a range of health problems.

They may be taking anti-depressants, sleeping tablets, incontinence treatments and painkillers for arthritis, for example.

Doctors last night said it was important that patients taking numerous drugs sat down with their GPs to check whether they were all necessary. In many cases there are alternative drugs available which don't carry the same risk.

The scientists do not yet know how these drugs cause memory problems or death but they believe they could



THE RISK FACTOR OF MIXING YOUR TABLETS

» MILD

Alverine: Brand name Spasmonal - for irritable bowel syndrome

Atenolol: Beta blocker for high blood pressure and heart disease

Codeine: Painkiller

Hydrocortisone: Skin cream used for eczema, acne and athlete's foot

Morphine: Painkiller

Warfarin: Heart disease

» MODERATE

Amantadine: Parkinson's disease

Loxapine: Dementia

Oxcarbazepine: Brand name Trileptal - for epilepsy

» SEVERE

Amitriptyline: Antidepressant

Chlorphenamine: Brand name Piriton - allergies such as hayfever

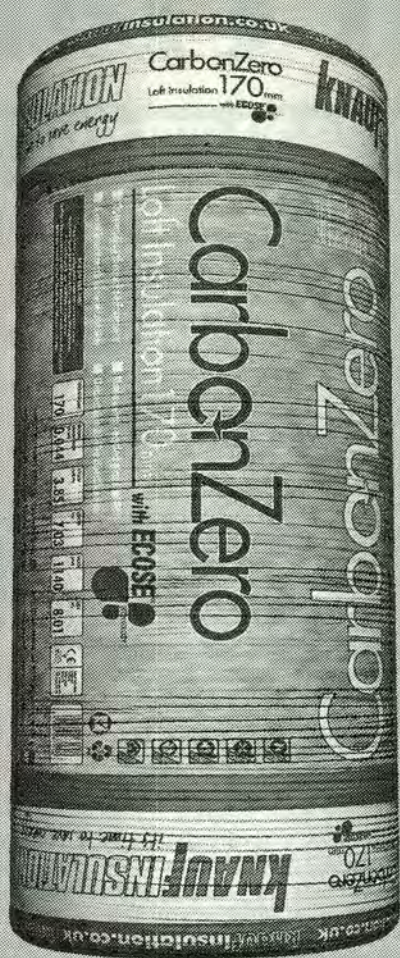
Diphenhydramine: Brand name Nytol - sleeping tablets

Paroxetine: Brand name Seroxat - antidepressant

Oxybutynin: Brand name Ditropan - incontinence

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You mustn't panic... but call your doctor

THIS report is an incredibly good piece of work.

It's a study on anticholinergic drugs. Loads of drugs are anticholinergic which is why it's such a long list.

But anticholinergic drugs can have widespread effects throughout the whole body. They affect your heart, your pupils, your gut, they can cause constipation and cause your mouth to dry out.

So what this study has done is create a tool to work out how much these drugs hit your system.

Some have a mild effect, others a moderate effect and some a severe effect. This is why it's such a clever and important study.

What patients must do if they are on any of these drugs is to think about whether they are suffering any sort of tummy pains, breathing problems, heart palpitations or feeling more confused or fuzzy and forgetful. This might be caused by these drugs. It's terri-



Dr Martin Scurr's ANALYSIS

bly important that people with these symptoms contact their doctor because if we look at this study, 20 per cent of patients taking some of these drugs had died within a two-year period.

So people need to go to their GP. Relatives of older patients need to pay attention to exactly what drugs they are taking as they may not be aware - particularly those with dementia.

But it's important not to panic and not to stop taking any drug before you have consulted your doctor.

The risk is far less important in younger people who may be taking one of these medications for only a short period of time.

Dr Scurr writes a weekly advice column in Good Health

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