

Study Shows Antipsychotic Drugs Given for Dementia Pose Risks

According to a May 26 Reuters News Service report, elderly dementia patients prescribed antipsychotic drugs are at three times the risk of a serious health problem or dying within a month of treatment, compared to those not given the drugs, Canadian researchers say.

The medications have been used by doctors to treat aggression in people who are not psychotic or schizophrenic, but there are risks for elderly dementia patients prescribed the drugs, according to Dr. Paula Rochon of the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences in Toronto, and colleagues.

"Of residents newly admitted to a nursing home, 17 percent are started on antipsychotic drugs within 100 days of their admission," often for short periods to control delirium, delusions or aggressive behavior, Rochon wrote.

"Antipsychotic drugs should be prescribed with caution even for short-term therapy," she concluded in the report published in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

Three years ago, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration required warnings on antipsychotic drugs notifying patients and doctors of the risks of heart problems or infections in elderly dementia patients.

Previous research has suggested the drugs cause dry mouth and difficulty swallowing, which can lead to pneumonia. Side effects such as dizziness can increase the risk of falls.

The seven-year study of more than 40,000 people age 65 or older -- half in nursing homes -- found 5.2 percent of the nursing homes residents died within a month of being given one of the newer class of so-called atypical antipsychotic drugs.

By comparison, 3.3 percent of residents who did not take the drugs died within a month. Among community-dwelling patients, nearly 14 percent taking the drugs suffered a "serious health event" within 30 days, compared to about 4 percent not on the drugs.

Atypical antipsychotic drugs, which the study said had been available for about a decade, include risperidone, marketed by Johnson & Johnson as **Risperdal**; olanzapine, made by Eli Lilly and Co. under the brand name **Zyprexa**; and quetiapine, sold by AstraZeneca Plc under the brand name **Seroquel**.

An older class of "conventional" antipsychotic drugs that includes haloperidol, marketed by Johnson & Johnson as **Haldol**, posed even higher risks -- four times the risk -- of serious health problems or death, the study found. (Reporting by Andrew Stern; Editing by Michael Conlon and Eric Walsh)