

# For older adults with heart failure: Can taking too many medications reduce the ability to perform daily activities?

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As we age, we tend to develop a number of chronic health conditions and concerns. Often, managing health problems can mean that older adults may take many different medications. When older adults take five or more medicines (a scenario health experts call "polypharmacy", it can increase the risk of harmful side effects.

Polypharmacy can contribute to serious problems including falls, disability, and hospitalizations. Taking more than five medications is especially common among older adults with [heart failure](#), which is the leading cause of hospitalization for [people](#) age 65 and older. Doctors often prescribe several different drugs to improve heart failure, but this can increase your risk of harmful side effects and interactions between your medications. Older adults who have trouble performing routine daily activities are at a particularly [high risk](#) for the negative effects of taking a large number of medications.

In a new study, researchers examined whether limitations in [older adults'](#) abilities to perform their routine daily activities were linked to taking multiple medications for heart failure. They published their study in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers examined data from 2003-2014 from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). They looked at whether limitations in performing routine daily activities were linked to

the number of drugs taken by people aged 50 and older with heart failure.

People in the study (most of whom were around age 70) had multiple chronic conditions, which included [high blood pressure](#), diabetes, anemia, asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, [coronary artery disease](#), prior heart attack, prior stroke, thyroid disease, liver disease, cancer, chronic kidney disease, dialysis, high cholesterol, and arthritis. They were also considered to be frail. People who are frail can be weak, have less endurance, feel exhausted, and be less able to function well.

Nearly 25 percent of the people in the study had trouble thinking and making decisions (also known as cognitive impairment). Cognitive difficulties were more common among people who also had problems performing their routine daily activities.

In the study, 74 percent of the participants took five or more medications. People who had difficulty performing their daily activities took more medications and were more likely to take more than five medications compared to people who didn't have trouble performing their routine daily activities.

The authors suggested that health care providers might not be taking limitations in performing routine daily activities into account when prescribing drugs for people with heart failure. This may unnecessarily expose older people with heart failure to a higher risk of harmful side effects associated with their prescriptions.

**More information:** Parag Goyal et al, Association Between Functional Impairment and Medication Burden in Adults with Heart Failure, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15654](#)

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