Seniors on multiple meds a driving hazard

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(HealthDay)—Many older drivers take medications known to raise the risk of a crash, a new study shows.

It found that nearly 50 percent of older adults who drive use seven or more medications. Nearly 20 percent take what are called potentially inappropriate medications because they have limited benefits, pose excess risk of harm, or both.

Most of these potentially inappropriate medications—including benzodiazepines like Valium and older antihistamines—can cause blurred vision, confusion, fatigue or clumsiness. That can increase a driver's risk of a crash by up to 300 percent, according to the study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

"There is a growing population of older drivers who use multiple medications and likely do not realize the impact these prescriptions may have on their driving," said David Yang, executive director of the foundation.

"This new research shows that the more medications an older driver takes, the more likely they are to use an inappropriate medication that can potentially cause driving impairment," Yang added in an AAA news release.

The survey of 3,000 older drivers also found that the most commonly used medications affect driving ability and increase crash risk.

They include treatments to treat heart and blood vessel conditions (73 percent), as well as pain medications, stimulants and anti-anxiety drugs (70 percent).

Previous AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety research found that fewer than 18 percent of older drivers said they'd ever been warned by their health care provider about how their prescription drugs can affect driving ability.

Currently, there are 42 million drivers aged 65 and older in the United States. That number is expected to increase substantially over the next decade, which would make seniors the largest group of drivers.

"Taking multiple medications affect all of us, but older drivers can be particularly vulnerable. Ask your doctor and pharmacist as many questions as necessary to ensure you understand why you need the medications prescribed to you, and how they can affect your driving," said Jake Nelson, AAA director of traffic safety advocacy and research.

"Don't be afraid to question health care providers. It's their job to help you. And the answers may just save your life," Nelson said.

More information: The U.S. National Institute on Aging has more about older drivers.

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