

Potentially risky drugs and their safer alternatives: Beers drugs commonly used in SK and recommended substitutes

Many Saskatchewan seniors are taking drugs that increase their risk of confusion, dizziness, and falls. This chart lists drugs that experts agree should be used with caution, and suggests alternatives that are safer and equally effective for most people. If you are on one or more of these medications, DO NOT stop taking them, but DO talk to your doctor about whether you should switch to different drugs.

The following chart is modified from: Fick DM et al. Updating the Beers criteria for potentially inappropriate medication use in older adults: results of a US consensus panel of experts. Archives of Internal Medicine. 2003 Dec 8-22;163(22):2716-24 with permission of the American Medical Association. Other sources consulted: Saskatchewan Prescription Drug Plan Formulary. Regina SK: Saskatchewan Health. 2005.

Drug on Beers list	Comments (Beers rationale)	Alternatives
Propoxyphene & combo products	Offers few analgesic advantages over acetaminophen, yet has the adverse effects of other narcotic drugs	Acetaminophen, various NSAIDs, acetaminophen with codeine, morphine
Indomethacin	Of all available nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, this drug produces the most CNS adverse effects	Other NSAIDs such as naproxen or ibuprofen
Pentazocine	Narcotic analgesic that causes more CNS adverse effects, including hallucinations and confusion, more commonly than other narcotic drugs. Additionally, it is a mixed agonist and antagonist.	Morphine, codeine, topical fentanyl patches
Amitriptyline	Because of its strong anticholinergic and sedation properties, amitriptyline is rarely the antidepressant choice for elderly patients	SSRIs (if treating depression), nortriptyline or desipramine (alternative TCAs with less anticholinergic effects) or gabapentin (for treating pain)
Doxepin	Because of its strong anticholinergic and sedation properties, doxepin is rarely the antidepressant choice for elderly patients	Same as list for amitriptyline
Flurazepam	This benzodiazepine hypnotic has an extremely long half-life in elderly patients (often days), producing prolonged sedation and increasing the incidence of falls and fracture. Shorter acting benzodiazepines are preferable.	Lorazepam, oxazepam, temazepam
Doses of short-acting/ultra short-acting benzodiazepines, doses greater than: lorazepam (3mg); oxazepam (60 mg); alprazolam (2 mg); temazepam (15 mg); and triazolam (.25 mg)	Because of increased sensitivity to benzodiazepines in elderly patients, smaller doses may be effective as well as safer. Total daily doses should rarely exceed the suggested maximums.	Try to slowly reduce dosage over time
Long-acting benzodiazepines: chlordiazepoxide (Librium) diazepam (Valium), clorazepate (Tranxene)	These drugs have a long half-life in elderly patients (often several days), producing prolonged sedation and increasing the risk of falls and fractures. Shorter acting benzodiazepines are preferred if a benzodiazepine is required.	Lorazepam, oxazepam, temazepam, clonazepam
Disopyramide (Norpace and Norpace CR)	Of all antiarrhythmic drugs, this is the most potent negative inotrope and therefore may induce heart failure in seniors. It is also strongly anticholinergic.	Depends highly on clinical scenario – consult cardiology or internal medicine if needed

Drug on Beers list	Comments (Beers rationale)	Alternatives
	Other antiarrhythmic drugs should be used	
Digoxin (Lanoxin) (should not generally exceed >0.125 mg/d)	Decreased renal clearance may lead to increased risk of toxic effects. In frail elderly, toxicity is also more likely with blood levels in upper therapeutic range	Consider periodic digoxin serum levels to ensure appropriateness of dosage as the patient ages (reduced renal clearance with age may necessitate periodic dosage reduction)
Methyldopa (Aldomet) and methyldopa-hydrochlorothiazide (Aldoril)	May cause bradycardia and exacerbate depression in elderly patients. Also greater risk of orthostatic hypotension.	Dependant on clinical scenario and comorbidities, but may include: thiazide diuretics, ACE-inhibitors, calcium channel blockers, beta-blockers, or angiotensin receptor blockers.
Chlorpropamide (Diabinese)	It has prolonged half-life in elderly patients and could cause prolonged hypoglycemia. Additionally, it is the only oral hypoglycemic agent that causes SIADH.	Glyburide, glimepiride, gliclazide, or other non-sulfonylurea oral hypoglycemic agents.
Gastrointestinal antispasmodic drugs: dicyclomine (Bentyl) propantheline (Pro-banthine)	GI antispasmodic drugs are highly anticholinergic and have uncertain effectiveness. These drugs should be avoided (especially for long-term use)	Dependent on clinical scenario – consult GI or internal medicine if needed
Anticholinergics and antihistamines: hydroxyzine (Atarax)	All nonprescription and many prescription antihistamines may have potent anticholinergic properties. Non-anticholinergic antihistamines are preferred in elderly patients when treating allergic reactions.	Cetirizine (Reactine), fexofenadine (Allegra), loratadine (Claritin), desloratadine (Aerius)
All barbiturates (except Phenobarbital) except when used to control seizures = 1) amobarbital sodium, 2) pentobarbital sodium, and 3) secobarbital sodium	Are highly addictive and cause more adverse effects than most sedative or hypnotic drugs in elderly patients.	Non-drug measures for sleep, anxiety, behaviour. Drugs: Zaleplon (Starnoc), Zopiclone (Imovane), various benzodiazepines.
Meperidine (Demerol)	Not an effective oral analgesic in doses commonly used. May cause confusion and has many disadvantages relative to other narcotic drugs.	Morphine, codeine, topical fentanyl patches
Ticlopidine (Ticlid)	Has been shown to be no better than aspirin in preventing clotting and may be considerably more toxic. Safer, more effective alternatives exist.	ASA (Aspirin), clopidogrel (Plavix), Aggrenox, warfarin
Daily fluoxetine (Prozac)	Long half-life of drug and risk of producing excessive CNS stimulation, sleep disturbances, and increasing agitation. Safer alternatives exist.	Shorter acting SSRIs include: citalopram (Celexa), paroxetine (Paxil), sertraline (Zoloft)
Orphenadrine (Norflex)	Causes more sedation and anticholinergic adverse effects than safer alternatives.	Dependent on clinical scenario
Thioridazine (Mellaril)	Greater potential for CNS and extrapyramidal adverse effects.	Depends on clinical scenario –high-potency or atypical antipsychotics (haloperidol, risperidone, quetiapine olanzapine)
Mesoridazine (Serentil)	CNS and extrapyramidal adverse effects.	See thioridazine
Short acting nifedipine (Procardia and Adalat)	Potential for hypotension and constipation. 5 & 10 mg capsule (i.e., not sustained or extended release tablets)	Long acting nifedipine (Adalat XL), felodipine (Renedil), amlodipine (Norvasc)
Clonidine (Catapres)	Potential for orthostatic hypotension and CNS adverse effects.	Dependent on clinical scenario and comorbidities, but may include: thiazide diuretics, ACE-inhibitors, calcium channel blockers, beta-blockers, or angiotensin receptor blockers.
Cimetidine (Tagamet) - H2 blocker	CNS adverse effects including confusion.	Ranitidine (Zantac) or others (dose may need to be decreased if reduced renal function)
Thyroid (Desiccated thyroid)	Concerns about cardiac effects. Safer alternatives available.	Levothyroxine (Eltroxin, Synthroid)
Estrogens only (oral)	Evidence of the carcinogenic (breast and endometrial cancer) potential of these agents and lack of cardioprotective effects in older women.	Depends on reason for use