

# Improving Dementia Care

## The role of prescribers

*Reducing the reliance on antipsychotic drugs in dementia care*



Antipsychotic drug therapy is an off-label treatment for the behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia. However, these medications are appropriate only in select cases. Inappropriate use of antipsychotic medications can harm people with dementia, as noted in the Food and Drug Administration's black box warning. Yet, in spite of increased mortality risk, antipsychotics continue to be used as a chemical restraint in nursing home residents with dementia but no underlying mental health issues.

Data suggests that, in some Texas facilities, prescribers add new diagnoses, such as schizophrenia, to residents' clinical records to justify antipsychotic use, even in residents without a history of mental illness. This means many residents with dementia may be subjected to unnecessary mental illness assessments due to inaccurate diagnoses. When residents lack a history of mental illness, facility staff should not ask prescribers to justify potentially unnecessary drugs. Making a diagnosis "fit" the medication causes ethical and clinical practice issues.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is aware of this issue, as is the United States Office of the Inspector General. CMS conducts focused dementia care surveys targeting nursing homes with high antipsychotic usage for people with dementia. These surveys help ensure facilities provide high quality, person-centered care and utilize more non-pharmacological approaches to dementia care.

### The Role of Prescribers

Practitioners with prescribing privileges (e.g., physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants) have a



key role in reducing the inappropriate use of antipsychotic medications. As members of the interdisciplinary team, prescribers:

- Complete a comprehensive evaluation of the resident's condition, determining the continued appropriateness of the resident's current medical regimen and relevant medical issues.
- Review antipsychotic medications closely and monitor for continued need, based on validated diagnosis as well as for active or new problems associated with their use.
- Document and institute a plan for gradual dosage reduction, including non-pharmacological interventions, leading to complete discontinuation of the antipsychotic medication usage.
- Avoid potential liability by using antipsychotic medications in residents with dementia as a last resort, in the lowest possible dose, for a limited time and with a well-defined rationale.

## How Prescribers Can Improve Dementia Care

Residents with dementia may display behaviors, often as a result of boredom, an inability to communicate or unmet basic needs such as pain relief. Prescribers must:

- Verify the nursing staff has assessed for pain.
- Document the specific condition and the targeted behavior for the use of antipsychotic medications.
- Review behavioral and side effect monitoring.
- Review and discuss recommendations from consulting pharmacists.
- Discuss and encourage gradual dosage reduction for residents with dementia.
- Challenge the facility to increase implementation of non-drug interventions.



### Non-Drug Therapy Works

Nursing home staff can select from an array of non-pharmacological approaches to optimize care for residents with dementia, instead of using potentially

harmful antipsychotic medications. Quality Monitoring Program pharmacists are committed to working with prescribers to implement non-pharmacological approaches. These approaches enhance the quality of life for people with dementia, protect them from substandard care and promote goal-directed, person-centered care for every nursing home resident.

To learn more, visit the [hhs.texas.gov](https://www.hhs.texas.gov) website and enter keyword “*antipsychotic*” in the search box at the top of the page to find the following resources:

#### DADS Initiatives:

- MUSIC & MEMORY<sup>SM</sup>
- One a Month Campaign for Reducing Antipsychotic Use
- Texas Reducing Antipsychotics in Nursing Homes (T.R.A.I.N.)

#### CMS Resources:

- National Partnership to Improve Dementia Care in Nursing Homes
  - Survey and Certification general information
  - Hand in Hand: CMS Dementia Care Toolkit
  - Survey and Certification letters
  - Web-Based Surveyor Training: Improving Dementia Care and Reducing Unnecessary Antipsychotic Medications in Nursing Homes
  - Adverse Drug Event Trigger Tool

*Additional information is available on the CMS website at [CMS.gov](https://www.cms.gov), including clarification on federal regulations for the National Partnership to Improve Dementia Care in Nursing Homes and the State Operations Manual, which contains information related to the federal regulations.*

#### Update of Quality Concerns in Dementia Care Webinar:

Listen to Dr. Madeleine Biondolillo and Dr. Lisa Glenn discuss why doctors should rarely prescribe antipsychotics in Texas nursing homes. The presentation is also available as a PDF.

Visit [hhs.texas.gov](https://www.hhs.texas.gov) website and enter keyword “*training*” in the search box at the top of the page to view the webinar.



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