

The Hidden Cost of Medication Errors in Senior Living - & How to Protect Your Communities

Medication Management PARTNERS

Every day in assisted living and memory care communities, staff carefully prepare and administer medications. For residents, these prescriptions are essential to managing chronic conditions, relieving pain, and maintaining quality of life. Yet behind this daily routine lies a critical risk: medication errors.

Across the U.S., medication errors cost the healthcare system an estimated **\$40 billion annually and account for more than 1.5 million preventable adverse drug events each year**. Older adults, who often take multiple prescriptions daily, face the greatest risk. For operators, these errors are not just a clinical concern—they carry financial, operational, and reputational consequences that impact the entire community.



A Closer Look at Assisted Living & Memory Care

Medication safety challenges are particularly acute in assisted living and memory care settings. Studies show that up to 60% of residents in assisted living experience medication errors, with the most common being “wrong time” errors, followed by incorrect dosage, omitted doses, and unauthorized medications. These aren’t minor issues—each misstep carries the potential for serious consequences, from preventable hospital visits to long-term health complications.

The problem is magnified by polypharmacy. More than 40% of older adults take five or more prescriptions daily, and nearly one in five takes 10 or more. The more medications a resident

uses, the higher the chance of an error—whether in ordering, administration, or monitoring. For residents living with dementia, the risk multiplies. Cognitive impairment limits the ability to self-advocate or recognize side effects, making them fully reliant on staff vigilance.

Medication errors impact over 1.5 million lives—and cost \$40 billion a year.

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The Ripple Effect of Errors

When a medication error occurs, the impact extends far beyond the individual resident. A single mistake can trigger a cascade of consequences:

- **Resident safety and well-being are compromised.**
Hospitalizations due to medication errors are not only traumatic for residents but can also accelerate health decline.
- **Staff are forced into reactive mode.**
Instead of focusing on proactive care, caregivers must investigate, document, and correct the mistake—adding stress and diverting time from other residents.
- **Families lose confidence.**
Medication safety is one of the top concerns for families choosing a senior living community. Errors quickly erode trust and satisfaction.
- **Communities face regulatory and financial risks.**
Survey deficiencies, liability claims, and unplanned hospital transfers can all carry costly consequences.

How to Safeguard Your Community

Medication errors are not inevitable. Senior living leaders can take meaningful steps to reduce risks and strengthen safety:

- **Partner with a pharmacy that understands assisted living and memory care.**
Consultant pharmacists provide ongoing medication regimen reviews, helping to identify polypharmacy concerns, prevent prescribing cascades, and optimize resident outcomes.
- **Combine technology with pharmacy expertise.**
Tools like electronic medication administration records (eMAR) reduce human error, but their true value is realized when paired with proactive pharmacy oversight that ensures the right drugs and doses are prescribed in the first place.
- **Invest in staff training and support**
Medication aides and caregivers need ongoing education on safe administration practices, common pitfalls, and how to communicate effectively with families about side effects and risks.
- **Foster a culture of safety.**
Encouraging staff to report near misses, standardizing protocols, and engaging families in medication discussions all strengthen the safety net.

■ Moving Forward

Medication errors aren't just statistics—they represent real risks for residents and real challenges for operators. In assisted living and memory care, where residents are particularly vulnerable, preventing these errors must be a priority.

At MMP, we go beyond filling prescriptions. We partner with communities to deliver pharmacy oversight, staff support, and clinical expertise designed to prevent errors before they happen. Because in senior living, safety isn't optional—it's the foundation of trust.

Sources

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