

## **WHAT CAREGIVERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MONITORING MEDICATIONS FOR NURSING HOME RESIDENTS**

As someone who cares for a loved one who lives in a nursing home, you need to know about the importance of monitoring all medications, especially antipsychotic drugs. Antipsychotic drugs are frequently used to address behavioral issues caused by dementia, including aggression, agitation and delirium, and can pose serious and even life-threatening side effects.

Because of the vulnerability of many nursing home residents, it's important for caregivers to know the rights of residents. State and federal laws give nursing home residents extensive rights, including the right to refuse to take antipsychotic medications. Residents who are in frail health or have dementia may not be able to exercise their rights and need to rely on someone else to make decisions about medications.

### **Who can consent to or refuse medications on behalf of a nursing home resident?**

Residents have the right to make their own choices about what medications to take. If they are unable to do so, a health care decision maker can make those decisions for them. A health care decision maker is someone with legal authority to make health-related decisions for another. There are several ways to become a health care decision maker:

- The resident signs a health care power of attorney asking a family member or friend to make health care decisions when he or she is unable to do so
- A court appoints a guardian with the authority to make health care decisions on behalf of the resident
- The resident cannot make the health care decision, has no health care agent or guardian, and state law authorizes a close relation or friend to act as a health care surrogate to make those decisions

### **What are the warning signs of overmedication?**

Health care decision makers should be included in the decision to administer antipsychotic drugs. Before giving consent on behalf of the resident, the decision maker should be informed about the possible side effects, and the reason for the doctor's recommendation. Possible adverse side effects include excessive sedation; lethargy; dizziness and unsteadiness, which can lead to falls and injuries; as well as social withdrawal, reduced well-being and increased cognitive decline. The convenience of the staff in managing behavior issues should not be the primary reason for the prescription.

### **What can a health care decision maker do to monitor medications?**

As a health care decision maker, you should watch for changes in behavior or side effects that may indicate your loved one needs different medications. Periodically review what drugs are being administered. Talk with the prescribing doctor if you have any questions or concerns about medications. If you still have concerns, talk with the long-term care ombudsman, and file a complaint with the state agency that regulates the facility.