

Are Medications Affecting Your Ears?

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Infections, loud noise, inner ear disease, tumors - all can rob us of our hearing and/or balance. Did you know that the medications taken on a daily basis have that same potential?

Drugs to control chronic conditions, cure infections and treat cancer can have adverse effects on our ears, such as hearing loss (temporary or permanent) and/or a ringing or buzzing noise in the ears (tinnitus). Some medications can also cause dizziness, vertigo or imbalance.

Which drugs put us at risk? There are many, and this list does not include all possible medications and their side effects. Listed here are a few of the more common drugs:

Diuretics: Commonly known as "water pills", the classification of water pills is known as "loop diuretics". Furosemide (brand name Lasix) and bumetanide (brand name Bumex) reduce the amount of fluid retained in the body. However, they can cause ringing in the ears as well as hearing loss.

Antibiotics: Prescribed to fight infections, the class of antibiotics known as "amino glycosides" are particularly risky for our ears. Antibiotics such as gentamicin, tobramycin, streptomycin, and neomycin can cause tinnitus and/or high frequency hearing loss. Since these drugs are usually given intravenously, and sometimes in high doses, they are more likely to cause side effects. Another brand of antibiotic, Cipro, which is used in the treatment of Anthrax, can cause tinnitus as well.

Chemotherapy: Cancer treatment usually includes several types of medications given in combinations over a period of time. Cisplatin, carboplatin, and vincristine can cause hearing loss. These drugs are given intravenously, sometimes in high doses.

Pain Medications: Aspirin or aspirin containing compounds used to control pain (such as arthritis) can cause tinnitus. In fact, one sign of too much aspirin is a ringing in the ears.

The amount of medication given and the way it is given can reduce or heighten the risk of ear damage. For example, medications given intravenously get into the blood faster than the oral route, and thus could affect the ear faster. Taking any of the above medications in combination can cause the risk of ear damage to rise. That is, if you take aspirin several times a day for arthritis pain and also take a diuretic, the risk of ear damage would be greater.

Medications are prescribed for a reason and they help us by improving our health and quality of life. What should we do about the potential for adverse effects on our ears?

Be aware - Inform your physician that you have a hearing loss already and are concerned about side effects. Talk to the pharmacist when you receive a new prescription about potential interactions with other medicines you are taking. Also, read the inserts provided by the pharmacy instead of tossing them in the trash.

Be vigilant - Read the label of any medication you take, including the over the counter drugs or supplements. Just because something is "all natural" that does not mean it is completely safe. Be alert for the first sign of ringing in your ears. Contact your physician if this occurs.

Be careful - Take your medications as prescribed. Twice the amount of something does not mean it will work better or quicker. Vicodin is a commonly prescribed pain killer. If abused, it can result in permanent hearing loss.

It is not necessary to be nervous about adding new medications, but it is wise to be informed about the benefits and risks of any medical treatment. The examples above offer a limited list of possible side effects. Being an informed patient can save your hearing.