

Signs and Symptoms:

Distinguishing among Aging, Polypharmacy, and Addiction

Signs/Symptoms	Aging	Polypharmacy	Substance Misuse/Addiction
Neglecting Responsibilities	Too tired or depressed to maintain home	Too intoxicated to realize	Alcohol/drug/medication use is more important
Engaging in dangerous activities	Driving to keep independence	Driving under the Influence (DUI)	DUI
Getting into legal trouble	Traffic violation or serious driving offense while clean and sober	Disorderly conduct due to confusion or paranoia	DUI
Problems in relationships	Isolating to grieve the loss of a spouse	Isolating because drugs are affecting cognition and awareness	Isolating to hide drinking or drug use
Forgetfulness	Onset of dementia	Bad drug combination	Too much of a drug
Changes in sleep patterns	Becomes a light sleeper	Sleeps excessively or very little	Trouble falling asleep
Abandons once-joyful activities	Lacks energy, no longer interested, depression	Medications cause fatigue	More interested in using drug of choice
Tremors, slurred speech, impaired coordination	Neurological condition	Bad drug combination	Intoxicated on drugs/medication or alcohol
Deterioration of physical appearance	Dementia	Bad drug combination	Caught in cycle of alcohol/drug/medication use to the exclusion of other concerns

Source: “Not As Prescribed, Recognizing and Facing Alcohol and Drug Misuse in Older Adults”, Harry Haroutunian, MD, Physician Director of the Professionals Program at Hazelden/Betty Ford Center. Published by AARP 2016