



People taking five or more medicines a day increases 250%

Conall Ó Fátharta

Irish people are taking more prescription medicine than ever before — with a 250% increase in the number of people taking five or more medications in just 15 years.

The study from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) Department of General Practice found that people in Ireland are taking more prescribed medications now than they were 18 years ago.

However, the research also revealed that, despite this increase, the quality of prescribing medications in Ireland has improved with a marked 60% decreased risk associated with prescribing drugs in older people.

The research, which charted how prescribing has changed for medical card patients over a 15-year period, highlighted a 250% increase in the prevalence of polypharmacy (the use of five or more medications by a single patient) across all age groups from 1997 to 2012.

When demographic changes were accounted for, the number of people being prescribed five or more medications increased four-fold and the number of people taking 10 or more medicines rose ten-fold.

The study also investigated potentially inappropriate prescribing (PIP) — the use of a medication in which its risks outweigh its benefits, in those aged over 65.

It found that, despite the surge in the numbers on multiple medications, there was a 60% decrease in risk of PIP in the older Irish population.

The medications which have seen the highest prescription increases over the 15 year period of the study include statins for cholesterol, anti-platelet drugs such as aspirin and proton pump inhibitors for stomach

acid. Prescriptions for drugs such as aspirin and digoxin were found to decrease over the course of the study.

Commenting on the findings, HRB PhD scholar in Health Services Research at the HRB Centre for Primary Care Research in RCSI and lead author of the study, Frank Moriarty, said it was “reassuring” that the level of inappropriate prescribing had reduced.

“We have seen an escalation in the number of people, particularly those in middle and older age, taking multiple regular medicines in recent years and it is now normal for someone aged over 65 to be prescribed at least five different drugs,” he said.

“The more medicines a person is prescribed, the higher the chance of drug interactions, side effects or adverse events. So with more people taking complex combinations of drugs than ever before, it’s reassuring that the risk of potentially inappropriate prescribing has reduced.”