

IMPORTANT FACTS FOR NURSING HOME RESIDENTS ABOUT PSYCHOTROPIC DRUGS

A psychotropic drug is a drug that affects how someone thinks, feels, or understands reality. People who hear voices in their heads, see people who aren't there, are afraid for no reason, or cry often and are always sad might be helped by a psychotropic drug.

Psychotropic drugs can have dangerous and sometimes permanent side effects. These include sleepiness, confusion, falling, difficulty balancing and moving, incontinence, loss of appetite, and agitation. Illinois has strict laws about giving psychotropic drugs to nursing home residents.

1. A psychotropic drug can be given to a resident only if it is ordered by a doctor to treat an illness.
2. A psychotropic drug can be given only with the written informed consent of the resident or the resident's health-care power-of-attorney or guardian. Informed consent means that the decision-maker is told the resident's diagnosis, and the possible risks and benefits of taking the drug. The form must say what drug is to be given, the maximum dosage, and for how long it can be given.
3. The staff must have a behavioral plan to help the resident feel better. They should do specific things to encourage good behavior and discourage harmful actions.
4. The staff must keep track of and write down how the resident reacts to the drug. When the consent period expires, the resident can keep taking the drug only if the doctor orders it and the health-care decision-maker signs a new informed consent form. The decision-maker must be told how the drug has affected the resident, including any bad effects, before signing a new consent form.
5. In most cases, once the resident's condition is stable, the staff and the doctor must try to stop giving the drug, or give less of it, to see if the resident can do well without it.
6. A resident cannot be forced or tricked into taking a psychotropic drug without a court order.

Before giving consent for a psychotropic drug, make sure you understand the diagnosis and what symptoms are being treated. Some scary or self-destructive behavior is not caused by mental illness. The resident may be agitated or depressed because of some other medication (s)he takes, or because something bad happened to her/him at the nursing home. Talk to the doctor about this. There may be other ways to treat the resident's behavior, including non-psychotropic drugs, behavior therapy, changing other medications or changing circumstances in the nursing home.

If you are authorized to see the resident's nursing home records, check them when you visit. Make sure you know what drugs the resident is taking and why.

If you want more information about psychotropic drug use in nursing homes, and alternatives to psychotropic drugs, call the Illinois Department on Aging, **1-800-252-8966**, for the phone number of your local nursing home resident ombudsman.

Information courtesy of the Chicago Department on Aging: Joyce Gallagher, Commissioner; Richard M Daley, Mayor.

