Potentially Inappropriate Use of Antipsychotics in Long-Term Care

Choosing Wisely Canada Recommendation

Don't use antipsychotics as first choice to treat behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia.

Practice Points

1. Health Canada has issued a black box warning for antipsychotic prescriptions in seniors, indicating that their use is strongly contraindicated and poses a significant risk to seniors, including premature death.

2. Rates of long-term care (LTC) residents on antipsychotics in Canada (CA) has steadily risen since the onset of COVID-19.

3. Antipsychotic drugs should only be used when symptoms are severe, disabling and/or threatening patient or caregiver safety and when environmental and non-pharmacologic techniques have been implemented.

4. Attempts at drug withdrawal/reduction should be made regularly to avoid and reduce serious side effects.

5. People with dementia can become disruptive, behave aggressively, and/or resist care. Identify the cause of the behaviour to determine whether drug treatment is necessary.

6. A group of pan-Canadian health organizations have formed an Appropriate Use Coalition (AUC) to improve the appropriate prescribing and use of medications in Canada. In June 2025, the AUC set a new national target that aims to reduce inappropriate antipsychotic use in Canada's long-term care homes, set at 15% (source: https://ltcmeds.ca/targets/).

Data

Data on potentially inappropriate use of antipsychotics in LTC facilities in CA was obtained from the Canadian Institute for Health Information website from 2019 to 2024.

Results

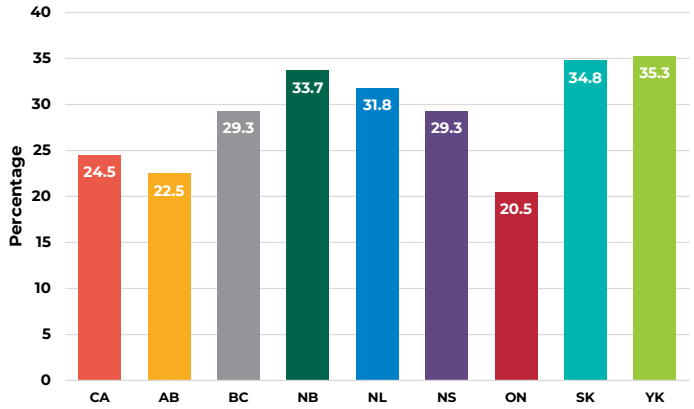

Figure 1. Percentage of Potentially Inappropriate Antipsychotic Use in LTC across CA, 2023/24

- In 2023/24, 24.5% of the residents in LTC facilities in CA were on antipsychotic drugs without a diagnosis of psychosis. Yukon (YK) was the highest with 35.5%, followed by Saskatchewan (SK) (34.8%), New Brunswick (NB) (33.7%), then Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) (31.8%). Ontario (ON) had the lowest with 20.5%.

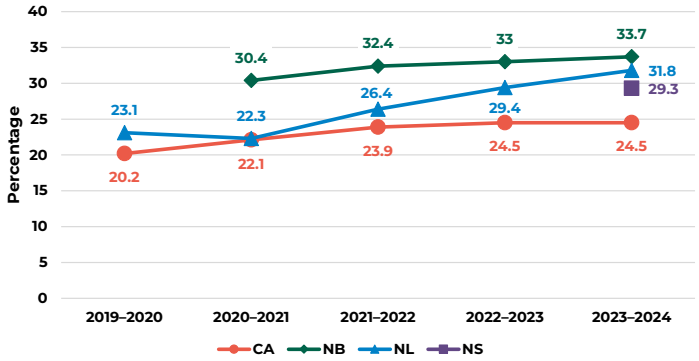

Figure 2. Percentage Trend of Potentially Inappropriate Antipsychotic Use in LTC between CA and the Atlantic Provinces, 2019/20-2023/24

- From 2020/21 to 2023/24, NL had the second highest rate of potentially inappropriate antipsychotic use in LTC in Atlantic CA. NB had the highest.

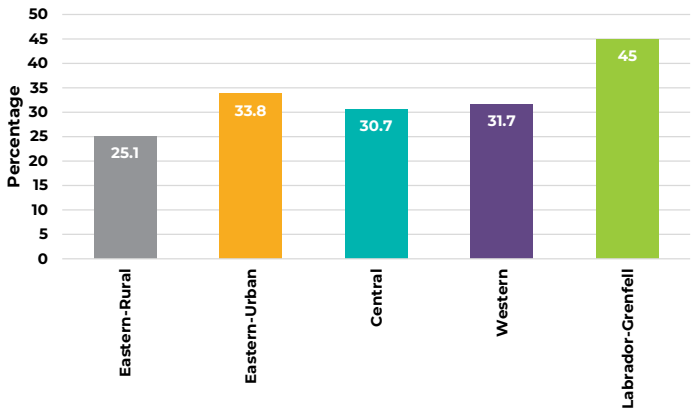

Figure 3. Percentage of Potentially Inappropriate Antipsychotic Use in LTC in NL by Health Zone, 2023/24

- In 2023/24, the Eastern-Rural health zone had the lowest rate of potentially inappropriate antipsychotic use in LTC in NL while Labrador-Grenfell had the highest.

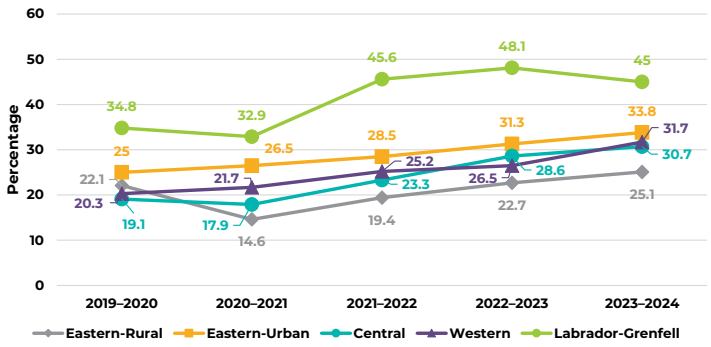

Figure 4. Percentage Trend of Potentially Inappropriate Antipsychotic Use in LTC in NL, 2019/20-2023/24

Conclusions

1. In CA, NL has the 4th highest rate of potentially inappropriate use of antipsychotics in LTC, the second highest in Atlantic CA after NB.

2. From 2019/20 to 2023/24, the percentage trend of potentially inappropriate use of antipsychotics in LTC in NL increased from 23.1% to 31.8%.

3. The lowest use of antipsychotics in LTC in NL in 2023/24 was in the Eastern-Rural health zone (25.1%), while the highest was in Labrador-Grenfell (45%).

4. As the harms outweigh the benefits in seniors with dementia, use of antipsychotics for behavioural or psychological symptoms should be limited.

5. NL Health Services has 34 LTC homes enrolled in Healthcare Excellence Canada's Sparking Change in Appropriate Use of Antipsychotics Rewards program, in partnership with the Department of Health and Community Services and Quality of Care NL, to reduce inappropriate use and enhance quality care of residents.