



Psychiatric medications

Introduction

The experience of mental illness can have a profound impact upon people's work, family and social lives, as well as on confidence and self-esteem.

Most people need assistance in rebuilding their lives after experiencing mental illness. Ideally, treatment involves biological (medical), psychological and social components. Whilst medications are the cornerstone of treatment for most mental illnesses, they are not sufficient in themselves to lead people to recovery. Instead, medications will alleviate or ease symptoms for most people, providing a window of opportunity to begin the journey to recovery.

The ongoing use of medications will also assist in stabilising symptoms and preventing relapse.

This guide may not be all encompassing as new medications or 'brands' may be marketed. If you are unsure about a particular medication, check with your doctor or pharmacist.

General guidelines and precautions in relation to psychiatric medication

Finding the right medications – persist!

In searching for the right medications, it is important to understand that both symptoms and diagnoses can change over time. Typically then, a person will be prescribed a variety of medications. It is important that the person who is taking the medication understands what particular medications are aiming to achieve and that the person plays an active role in partnership with the treating doctor in finding the appropriate medication and

dosage, and in talking through concerns about side effects.

Medications have both desired effects (eg reducing symptoms) and undesired effects commonly called side effects (eg drowsiness). The aim is to find medications that are most tolerable for a particular person and have the least number of side effects as well as effectively reducing symptoms. Adherence to medications is much more likely when it is clear that the benefits of taking the medication outweigh the costs. Changes in medications and/or in dosage need to be achieved in partnership between the person taking the medication and the doctor to find optimum outcomes.

New medications are becoming available regularly, so it is worth pursuing the search for a medication that has the most benefit and the least costs for a particular person.

A feature of most psychiatric medications is that they may only begin to have a beneficial effect over several weeks. This can cause frustration and confusion about whether the medication is working adequately or is in fact the right one. It is best to be patient and communicate well with the doctor about the suitability of the medication.

It is useful to request information about:

- the name of the medication, what it is supposed to do, and when it should begin to take effect;
- how it is taken and for how long this might be necessary;
- any food, drinks, other medicines and activities the person should avoid while taking this medication;

- possible side effects and what should be done if they occur;
- sources of information about this medication (eg. internet sites, pamphlets).

Looking up medications in medical texts, drug texts, or on the internet can be overwhelming and alarming. Many possible effects are listed, but not necessarily in order of importance or frequency of occurrence and the benefits of the medication may not be well presented. Discussing concerns with the doctor or a health professional can be helpful.

It is also important to remember that people may experience more than one diagnosable and treatable condition and may be prescribed a combination of medications.

Before starting or changing any psychiatric medication it is important that the doctor knows whether the person:

- has a particular active medical condition;
- is taking any other prescription or non-prescription medicines including complementary or herbal treatments;
- is smoking, consuming alcohol or street drugs;
- is breastfeeding, pregnant or planning to become pregnant.

It is important to take all medications as directed, not just on an as needed basis. Most medications for mental illnesses do not work when taken irregularly, and extra doses can cause unnecessary side effects.

Any unusual feeling may be a side effect and should be reported to the doctor. After taking a medication for some time, people will be better able to identify which feelings go with the medication and which do not. However, if a person is still experiencing discomfort or is worried or afraid, speaking with the doctor can provide reassurance and alert the doctor that a review of medication may be required. Describe side effects in detail to the doctor before changing or stopping any medication.

Medications for psychosis

General information

Medications for psychosis are called 'antipsychotics'.

Psychosis is a condition in which the functioning of a person's brain is severely disrupted, affecting their thoughts, perceptions, emotions and behaviour. A person experiencing psychosis will have confused thoughts and speech, and difficulty in distinguishing reality.

Antipsychotic medications are used for treating schizophrenia, schizophreniform psychosis, schizoaffective disorder, substance-induced psychosis and other conditions where psychotic symptoms (ie. hearing voices, hallucinations confused thinking or delusional ideas) are present.

Interactions between prescribed medications and other drugs such as alcohol and illicit drugs is often unpredictable. Report to the doctor if illicit drugs are being used.

The medicines may take a few weeks to work so it is important for people to continue with the treatment even when they think it may not be working. A medication should be taken for at least three weeks before a change is considered unless severe, adverse reactions necessitate discontinuation. Maximum improvement may take several months.

Other medications may be prescribed with the antipsychotic to assist with the treatment of additional symptoms or side effects.

Typical (Conventional) antipsychotic medications

Oral

Generic name	Common brand names
chlorpromazine	Largactil
haloperidol	Serenace
pericyazine	Neulactil
pimozide	Orap
thioridazine	Aldazine
thiothixene	Navane
trifluoperazine	Stelazine
zuclophethixol	Clopixol

Long-term injectables

Generic name	Common brand names
flupenthixol decanoate	Fluanxol
fluphenazine decanoate	Modecate
haloperidol decanoate	Haldol
zuclophethixol decanoate	Clopixol

Some possible effects and precautions

Side effects include constipation, dry mouth, blurred vision, dizziness (especially after standing up quickly), difficulty in urinating, rapid heart rate, weight gain, allergic reactions, impaired alertness, drowsiness or sedation, breast enlargement and/or tenderness, and a change in menstrual cycle for women. Breast enlargement/engorgement or tenderness can also occur in men.

These medicines can also cause movements such as motor restlessness, tremor, muscle stiffness or rigidity and muscle jerking, also eye rolling and other involuntary body movements. These are managed with a range of side-effect medications (see below).

Long term use of these medicines can result in tardive dyskinesia which is a syndrome of involuntary movements, especially around the mouth. The involuntary movements include lip puckering, chewing movements and tongue protrusion, involuntary leg jiggling, or movement of neck, trunk, or pelvis. Contact your doctor if you are experiencing any of these symptoms.

Atypical antipsychotic medications

Oral

Generic name	Common brand names
amisulpride	Solian
aripiprazole	Abilify
clozapine	Clozaril, Clopine
olanzapine	Zyprexa
risperidone	Risperdal
quetiapine	Seroquel
ziprasidone	Zeldox

Long-term injectables

Generic name	Common brand names
risperidone	Risperdal Consta

Some possible effects and precautions

Side effects include weight gain, drowsiness, sleep disturbance and change in eating patterns, dizziness, excess saliva, and agitation.

For clozapine, there are a number of serious side effects requiring close monitoring during treatment. Regular blood tests will be taken to check for signs of the serious (but infrequent) blood condition agranulocytosis (decrease in number of white blood cells that can lead to serious infection and death). Some heart conditions can also develop and monitoring for these will be done also. At certain dosages, seizures may also occur.

Medications for side effects

(also called anticholinergic medications or antiparkinsonian agents)

General information

These are used to treat the involuntary muscle effects of antipsychotic medications. Many involuntary symptoms include:

- loss of facial expression;
- lack of drive to initiate movement;
- feelings of restlessness in the muscles – can't stay still;
- muscle stiffness or rigidity;
- muscle jerks or spasms.

Generic name	Common brand names
benzhexol	Artane
benztropine	Benztrop, Cogentin

Side effects of these medications can include dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, drowsiness, difficulty in urinating and worsening of glaucoma.

Medications for mood disorder

General information

Mood disorders are sustained abnormal emotional states that disrupt people's lives. Feelings that range from depression and sadness to elation and excitement are often the experience of people who suffer a mood disorder.

Mood stabilizers are medicines that relieve the symptoms of mood changes such as mania and severe depression. They also prevent the recurrence of mania and depression in bipolar disorder when taken regularly over an extended period of time. The main medicines used are lithium carbonate and a range of drugs first marketed to treat epilepsy.

It is important to take the medication regularly as it can take a few weeks to notice the benefit. Often side effects are noticed before the benefit of the drug.

Each medicine has its own particular precautions. Blood tests are required with each to check that the dose is effective and to monitor for problems specific to each medication.

Generic name	Common brand names
carbamazepine	Tegretol, Teril
lithium carbonate	Lithicarb, Quilonum SR
sodium valproate	Epilim, Valpro

Some possible effects and precautions

Lithium carbonate is a simple element found in nature, some mineral waters and in the human body. At the right dose, determined by blood monitoring, lithium treats the symptoms of mania and helps prevent recurrence of manic and depressive symptoms.

Commonly experienced side effects are thirst, nausea, stomach upset, weight gain, slight shaking, swollen ankles and passing a lot of urine. If any of the following symptoms are noticed contact your doctor immediately: Severe shaking, blurred vision, drowsiness, weakness, twitching, diarrhea, vomiting, slurred speech or impaired concentration. Lithium can affect the kidneys and thyroid gland. Blood tests will monitor for any changes in thyroid or kidney function.

Carbamazepine is an epilepsy medication found to be effective in managing mania and preventing recurrence of mania and depression. The right dose is determined by response to treatment and checking the level of drug in the body.

Common side effects tend to occur at the start of treatment and decrease in severity over time. These include drowsiness, dry mouth, blurred vision, nausea, mild dizziness, ringing in the ears and headache.

If any of the following uncommon side effects are experienced contact your doctor urgently: Skin rash, hives or itching, sore throat and flu-like symptoms, severe diarrhea, unusual bruising or bleeding, or yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).

If the dose of carbamazepine is too high the following symptoms can be experienced: Severe nausea, vomiting, shaking, clumsiness, irritability, restlessness or agitation, confusion or changes in vision. Contact your doctor immediately if you experience any of these symptoms.

Sodium Valproate is an epilepsy medication found to be effective for treating acute mania and recurrences of mania or depression. The right dose is determined by response to treatment and checking the level of drug in the body (blood test).

Common side effects early in treatment are mild stomach cramps, nausea and vomiting, mild diarrhoea, headache, weight gain, change in menstrual cycle, trembling of hands or arms, drowsiness or rash.

Uncommon side effects requiring urgent medical attention include severe stomach cramps, unusual bruising or bleeding, changes in vision, spots before eyes, confusion, lethargy, vomiting, swollen face, yellow eyes or skin (jaundice), hair loss or change in hair texture, and persistent fever or sore throat.

When the dose of sodium valproate is too high the following symptoms may be experienced: Severe dizziness, severe drowsiness and racing heart beat. Contact your doctor immediately if you experience any of these symptoms.

Other antiepileptic drugs have been used in bipolar disorder. You should request specific information on these medicines from your doctor or health care professional when they are prescribed (see drug information contact at end of leaflet).

Medications for depression

General information

These are used for treating symptoms of depression, such as persistent sadness, hopelessness, poor appetite, insomnia, lack of energy, difficulty in concentrating and diminished interest in usually pleasurable activities.

It will take a few weeks before noticing any improvement in symptoms although some unwanted effects may be experienced. The medicines may need to be taken for some time to improve mood and maintain the improvement.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors are most commonly prescribed because of their safety and tolerability. If these do not work then other antidepressant medicines may be trialed. Special precautions may need to be followed when changing from one antidepressant to another as combining antidepressant medications can result in serious reactions.

Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs)

Generic name	Common brand names
citalopram	Cipramil, Celapram, Talam, Talohexal
escitalopram	Lexapro
fluoxetine	Genrix, Fluohexal, Lovan, Prozac, Zactin
fluvoxamine	Faverin, Luvox, Movox
paroxetine	Aropax, Oxetine, Paxetine
sertraline	Xydep, Zoloft

Some possible effects and precautions

Side effects can include nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea especially early in treatment, insomnia or increased sedation (particularly in young patients), abnormal dreams, headache, palpitations, yawning, rash, sweating, anxiety, restlessness, sexual dysfunction, bruising.

Individuals who suddenly cease SSRI medications may experience discontinuation symptoms such as nausea, headaches, insomnia and flu-like symptoms.

Tricyclic antidepressants

Generic name	Common brand names
amitriptyline	Endep, Tryptanol
clomipramine	Anafranil, Clomipramine, Genrix, Placil
dothiepin	Dothep, Prothiaden
doxepin	Sinequan
imipramine	Melipramine, Tofranil
nortriptyline	Allegron

Some possible effects and precautions

Side effects can include constipation, dry mouth, weight gain, blurred vision, difficulty in urinating, dizziness (especially after standing up suddenly), sleepiness/sedation, rapid heart rate, arrhythmias. Rarely, behavioural complications such as mania or psychosis, seizure in susceptible patients.

Tricyclic antidepressants may increase the frequency of seizures with people who experience epilepsy, and episodes of seizures may occur for those who are not diagnosed with epilepsy.

Tricyclic medication may interfere with the rhythm of the heart, especially when taken in overdose.

Other side effects such as worsening of glaucoma, and difficulty passing urine should be closely monitored by the treating doctor.

Individuals who suddenly cease tricyclic medication may experience withdrawal symptoms such as nausea and headaches.

Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI's)

Generic name	Common brand names
moclobemide	Arima, Aurorix, Genrix, Maosig
phenelzine	Nardil
tranylcypromine	Parnate

Some possible side effects and precautions

The most serious adverse reaction seen with MAOIs is critically raised blood pressure often caused by eating tyramine-rich foods (strong flavoured foods or foods needing an aging process to bring out the flavour). This is particularly a risk with phenelzine and tranylcypromine. Always consult your doctor or pharmacist before taking ANY prescribed or non-prescribed medicine including those obtainable from the supermarket or health food store.

If taken with certain food and medications, MAOI can produce a severe reaction (critically raised blood pressure), which may rarely cause stroke or death.

Other side effects can include insomnia, dizziness, dry mouth, gastrointestinal disturbance

When treatment begins with a MAOI, it is extremely important to discuss the restrictions on both diet and medication (prescription and non-prescription) with the doctor.

Other antidepressants

Generic name	Common brand names
mirtazapine	Avanza, Mirtazon, Remeron
mianserin	Lumin, Tolvon
reboxetine	Edronax
venlafaxine	Efexor, Efexor XR

Some possible side effects and precautions

Mianserin/Mirtazapine can cause sedation, weight gain, dry mouth, dizziness, weakness and, very rarely serious blood changes. The doctor will monitor for any changes especially in the first 12 weeks of treatment.

Reboxetine is a specific noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor antidepressant. Common side effects include dry mouth, nausea, insomnia, racing heartbeat, difficulty urinating.

Venlafaxine is a selective inhibitor of both serotonin and noradrenaline (SNRI). It has a side effect profile similar to the SSRIs. As the dose increases there may be increase in blood pressure. The doctor will monitor this. When stopping venlafaxine a discontinuation syndrome similar to that with SSRIs may be experienced.

Medications for anxiety disorders

(also called anxiolytic medications)

General Information

The anxiety disorders are a group of illnesses, each characterised by persistent feelings of high anxiety. There are feelings of continual or extreme discomfort, tension with fear of panic attacks, usually without discernible cause.

These medications are used for the whole range of anxiety disorders, including social anxiety disorder, social phobia, generalised anxiety disorder and post traumatic stress disorder and panic disorder with or without agoraphobia. They are also useful in helping to manage agitation. Some are used to help people to sleep.

Antidepressant medications, particularly the SSRIs, clomipramine, venlafaxine and mirtazapine (see medications for depression above) are used to treat a range of anxiety disorders without the tolerance and dependence problems associated with benzodiazepines (Valium and drugs like it). Reboxetine may also be used in the treatment of panic disorder.

Alprazolam is used for the treatment of panic disorder with or without agoraphobia.

Temazepam is prescribed to help with sleeping

Clobazam is used, short-term, for acute anxiety.

Diazepam and Clonazepam are also used as anti-epileptic/seizure medications.

Occasionally Clonazepam may be used for agitation.

Benzodiazepine medications

Generic name	Common brand names
alprazolam	Kalma, Xanax Alprax
clonazepam	Paxam, Rivotril
diazepam	Atenex, Ducene, Valium
lorazepam	Ativan
oxazepam	Alepam, Murelax, Serapax
temazepam	Temaze, Euhypnas, Normison

Some possible side effects and precautions

Side effects can include drowsiness, dizziness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty in coordinating movements, dependence with long term use, may precipitate seizures in susceptible individuals, paradoxical reactions such as acute rage, excitement or stimulation may occur rarely.

As with all medications, take as directed. These drugs have high potential for misuse and dependence. Do not increase the dose or suddenly stop taking them without discussion with your doctor.

Withdrawal reactions, including restlessness, nervousness, confusion, weakness, anxiety and convulsions can be caused by sudden discontinuation.

Further information

Further information about psychotropic medications may also be obtained from the Psychotropic Drug Advisory Service at the Victorian Mental Health Research Institute on 03 9389 2920.

Other information lines include:

Medicines Line (NSW) 1300 888 763 (Mon-Fri 9am-6pm)

Consumer Adverse Medicine Events Line (NSW) 1300 134 237 (Mon-Fri 9am-6pm)

Queensland Medications Helpline (QLD) Freecall 1800 632 763

Useful references

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifa.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
www.mifellowship.org

Mental Health Research Institute
www.mhri.edu.au

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)
www.nami.org



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