

What You Should Know About Antipsychotic Medications

The medicines used to treat mental illness are known as psychotropic medications. There are four major categories of psychotropic medications. They are:

- antipsychotics
- antidepressants
- mood stabilizers
- antianxiety medications

These may be prescribed alone or in combination.

Psychotropic medicines are quite safe when properly used. However, it can take time to reach the right dosage and combination of medications. Adjustments in the dosages may be needed to deal with unwanted side effects. Here are some of the reasons:

- People respond differently to medications, so several may need to be tried.
- Dosages sometimes need to be adjusted, especially as treatment progresses.
- More than one medication may be needed. This may be due to other symptoms or treatable side effects.
- Some medicines need to be taken for several days or weeks before they become fully effective.

Antipsychotic Medications

Antipsychotic medications are prescribed for serious thought and mood disorders or any condition with psychosis. If they have been prescribed for you, taking them the right way can eliminate primary (or “positive”) symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions.

- Hallucinations are perceptions that you hear, see, smell, or feel that other people do not experience.
- Delusions are strongly held beliefs that are not true. They usually seem strange or odd to other people.

Antipsychotic medications can also help you become more organized in your thinking and speech. Some help eliminate other signs of psychosis, often referred to as the “negative” symptoms. These may include withdrawal and isolation, an inability to show or feel emotion, or trouble making decisions. In short, antipsychotics can help you have a better connection with reality. They are not addictive medications. Taking antipsychotic medicine is a basic element in

your return to a more normal life.

Typical Antipsychotics

Today, older medications are often referred to as typical or first generation antipsychotics. They are still used with good results by some people.

Chlorpromazine was the first medication used for thought disorder. (Thorazine is the brand name in the United States.) Chlorpromazine changed the way people with serious mental illnesses were treated. It was the first medicine to control the major symptoms of psychosis. It made it possible for many patients to be released from hospitals. However, chlorpromazine didn’t work for everyone. It had little effect on some symptoms such as feeling “flat” or withdrawal from others. Chlorpromazine and other drugs like it (phenothiazines) can cause side effects such as:

- drowsiness
- constipation
- dizziness when rising from a sitting or lying position
- dry mouth
- blurry vision
- shaking
- slowed movements
- muscle spasms
- hormone-related changes

To offset these side effects, other medicines could be prescribed or the dosage changed.

Although the phenothiazines were improved and refined, the next major breakthrough in medication came in the late 1970s with haloperidol. (Haldol is the brand name in the United States.) It helped many people who did not respond to the earlier antipsychotics.

Phenothiazines and haloperidol can have side effects that impact the muscles. They can make a person shake, have spasms, or be restless. These are known as EPS or extrapyramidal symptoms. Other side effects that many

patients find disturbing result from the effect these medicines have on hormone levels. Some people--- Some patients on these medications report sexual problems. These can include impotence in men and irregular periods in women. Side effects are discussed in more detail later.

“Atypical” Antipsychotics

A newer group of antipsychotic drugs is now in use thanks to ongoing research. They are called atypical drugs or second-generation antipsychotics.

The atypicals manage a wide range of symptoms of serious mental illness including:

- hearing voices
- bizarre thinking patterns
- speaking incoherently
- inability to relate to others
- feeling flat

These newer antipsychotic medications usually cause fewer and often milder side effects. They can greatly reduce the risk of muscular side effects and have little or no effect of hormone levels. The atypicals are creating opportunities for wellness for many patients who had limited chances for recovery in the past.

The government approved the first atypical in 1989. It was clozapine. (Clozaril is the brand name in the United States.) Many people who did not respond to other antipsychotics or had significant problems with side effects improved on this medication. The major drawbacks were its high cost in part due to the need for weekly blood test. Regular blood tests are needed because in rare cases this medicine can cause a serious white blood cell disorder called agranulocytosis.

Recently other atypicals have been approved for use in the United States. Each is a unique chemical compound that has undergone much research and testing. The newer atypicals:

- are as effective as the older medicines in treating the primary symptoms of psychosis (hallucinations, delusions, incoherent thinking and speech)
- are as effective as clozapine in treating withdrawal, flat feelings, and ambivalence
- do not require weekly blood testing because they have far less risk of white blood cell disorder
- may be more cost-effective than clozapine

Brand names of these newer atypical medicines

including men---find that their breasts enlarge and start to drip. This is called galactorrhea.

include:

- Seroquel (quetiapine fumarate)
- Risperdal (*risperidone*)
- Zyprexa (*olanzapine*)
- Geodon (*ziprasidone*)
- Abilify (*aripiprazole*)

Certain antipsychotic medications can increase the risk of diabetes. For this reason, many many doctors screen and monitor patients taking any of these drugs.¹

They offer new hope for people with serious mental illness and are allowing many more patients to have productive lives.

Safety and Side-Effect Issues

Safety issues and side effects are a natural concern for patients, families, and prescribers.

Although medications can have great effects, they all come with some risks. This is called the medication’s safety profile. Prescribers must sometimes balance the positive effect of medication against any possible harm it might cause. Everyone responds differently to various medicines, so several may be tried to see which is the most effective with the fewest side effects.

Psychotropic medications are relatively safe. However, the safety of their use also assumes that:

- A proper diagnosis has been made.
- Other medical conditions that could contribute to or imitate mental illness have been identified, treated, or ruled out.
- Proper medical follow-up is being done.

Side Effects

Psychotropic medications, like any prescribed medicine, have possible side effects. That’s why these medication must be ordered and monitored by a prescribing specialist, usually a psychiatrist. Some medications have mild side effects that often go away in a short period of time. However, more serious side effects are possible. For example, most antianxiety drugs can be habit forming. A few other medications require frequent blood testing for safe use. The most common side effects for antipsychotic medications are grouped into anticholinergic effects and extrapyramidal symptoms (EPS).

Anticholinergic effects are caused when a medication interferes with acetylcholine, one of the chemicals the body makes to help nerve cells communicate with each other. Muscles and glands may be affected. Anticholinergic effects may include:

- confusion
- blurred vision
- constipation
- dry mouth and nasal passages
- light-headedness
- difficulty with urination
- problems with bladder control
- palpitations

Sometimes these effects lessen as the body adjusts to the psychotropic medication. Many can be managed with small adjustments to the dose. Other nonmedical management methods can include sucking on hard candies for dry mouth or adding more fiber to your diet to relieve constipation.

Extrapyramidal Symptoms (EPS)

There is a network of nerve pathways in the brain known as the extrapyramidal system. This influences messages sent from the brain to the muscles. Certain medication---usually older types of antipsychotics---may disturb this system.

This can lead to:

- involuntary movements such as tremors, writhing movements, rigidity, and jerking motions
- problems with muscle tone and making the desired movements---such as slowed movement and rigidity seen with Parkinson's disease.

Most patients do not develop EPS. For those who do, adjusting the medication dosage may solve the problem. If the problem continues, the prescriber may change to another medication or add another medicine.

The newer antipsychotics have far fewer problems with EPS. As these medications become more common in the treatment of psychosis, EPS may become a less frequent problem.

Another possible side effect involving the extrapyramidal system is called tardive dyskinesia (TD). This is much more rare than the EPS symptoms

Anticholinergic Effects

discussed above. It is not yet known whether the newer atypical products have a lower potential to cause TD. However, there is some research which suggests this may be the case.

Other Side Effects

A rare but serious side effect is neuroleptic malignant syndrome. This involves unusual muscle rigidity and elevated body temperatures. Vital signs may be unstable, and the person may drift in and out of consciousness. If a person has these symptoms, seek immediate medical attention.

As discussed earlier, side effects related to hormones can include breast enlargement and fluid discharge, impotence, and other sexual problems. There are fewer of these problems with the newer medications.

Some patients may become light-headed or feel dizzy when they get up from lying down. This is called postural or orthostatic hypotension. It can usually be helped by getting up slowly and sitting on the edge of the bed for a moment or so before standing.

Early intervention may prevent or lessen these and other serious side effects. Let your treatment team know if you have any problems than might be related to your medicine. Also, the diaries and records you keep can help your treatment team see both your progress and problems.

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