

About Antipsychotic Medications



Hallucinations, voices, sounds, screams, laughter, frightening thoughts, confusion, incomplete thoughts, indecision, danger from every direction, ridicule, lack of energy, day/night reversal, arguments, anger, and sadness. All of these can be part of the experience of psychosis.

Antipsychotic medications can be extremely effective in suppressing, controlling and relieving all of these symptoms. They are among the most effective medications available. They represent a true miracle of modern medicine. But they also go to parts of the central nervous system that don't need their healing effects. In these well parts of the brain, the medications may even be disruptive. That disruption, as well as the side effects, will be discussed below.

Each person responds differently to treatment with an antipsychotic. Some antipsychotics may not have equal effect on the symptoms for every person. It is important to give the antipsychotic time to take effect. This may take as long as a month. Also the psychiatrist often prescribes a lower dose initially to allow the patient to adjust to the side effects before raising the dose to a therapeutic level. It is important to take the medication as prescribed so that the psychiatrist can accurately judge how well it is working.

Types of Antipsychotics

Today it is common to group the available antipsychotics into two large groupings. These are frequently referred to as first generation or "old" antipsychotics and second generation or "atypical" antipsychotics. The atypicals usually produce less movement disorder side effects than the older antipsychotics. Unfortunately the atypicals also appear to have a greater chance of causing diabetes, weight gain, high cholesterol, and related side effects usually referred to as *Metabolic Syndrome* than the older medications. Research on this issue is still ongoing, but the FDA has issued a warning that all patients taking the atypicals should have their blood sugar checked periodically to monitor for diabetes. In most other respects, all antipsychotics share common side effects. Both types should be considered when choosing an antipsychotic to try. It is important to decide which set of side effects the patient wants to risk.

Common Side Effects

All medications have side effects. Many people who take antipsychotic medications experience side effects during the first few weeks of treatment, but these problems are usually temporary and mild. Side effects that are particularly bothersome can often be treated by changing the dose of the medication, switching to a different medication, or treating the side effect directly with an additional medication.

Although there are common side effects, many people will not experience them or they will be very mild and tolerable. It is important to realize that in order to get relief from psychotic symptoms, you will probably have to live with some side effects. If the side effects do seem to be intolerable, consult your psychiatrist immediately. Do not abruptly discontinue your medications without the advice of a doctor.

Drowsiness – Many antipsychotics produce this side effect. It usually gets less severe over the span of a few weeks. If this is still a problem after that period, it is usually recommended that the patient take the medication at bedtime. If drowsiness still persists, a change to a different medication may be warranted. The atypical Abilify is an exception to this. Abilify often causes insomnia and difficulty sleeping. Many psychiatrists recommend taking Abilify when the person wakes up for the day instead of at bedtime.

Anticholinergic Side Effects – These side effects include dry mouth, constipation, difficulty in urination, and blurred vision. When these side effects occur, they usually appear early in the treatment and subside in a few weeks. They are very seldom severe enough to warrant a change in medications.

Cardiovascular Reactions – Antipsychotic medication may cause an increase in your heart rate or pulse. It may also cause a change in blood pressure. Standing up too quickly can produce fainting. The atypical Geodon may cause a change in heart rhythm. Although it is not required, some psychiatrists will have an EKG done in conjunction with prescribing Geodon to monitor this side effect.

Acute Dystonic Reactions – An acute dystonic reaction is a sudden occurrence of a twisting and stiffening of a group of muscles. It often involves the neck and jaw or may involve muscles running up both sides of the spinal cord or vertebrae (backbones). It usually occurs within the first hours or days of treatment with an antipsychotic, but can occur anytime. It can be relieved almost immediately by an injection of an anticholinergic medication. This usually indicates that a change to a different medication is needed. This is much more common with the old antipsychotics and less common with the atypical antipsychotics.

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Pseudoparkinsonism – This is usually not seen with the atypical antipsychotics. It includes a loss of facial expression, rigidity of the joints, slow body movements, drooling, small handwriting, and a tremor or shaking of the hands. These side effects usually begin days to weeks after the antipsychotic medication and are usually treated by the addition of an anticholinergic medication.

Agitated Restlessness – (Akathisia) is a physical reaction to antipsychotic medications in which the individual constantly feels like moving. The patient may pace up and down or have trouble sitting still. This is a very common side effect of the old antipsychotics and is rarely seen with the new atypical medications. If it is severe, a different antipsychotic is usually recommended.

Tardive Dyskinesia – This side effect is somewhat controversial as it is also a feature of the illness schizophrenia and has been observed in patients who have never been treated with an antipsychotic. The new atypicals are much less likely to have this side effect. Tardive dyskinesia refers to a group of involuntary movements that can affect any muscle group of the body, but it is more common in certain muscle groups, especially the facial muscles. The most typical symptoms include involuntary smiling, pouting, puckering, or smacking of the lips and also tongue movements or protrusion. In some cases it is irreversible, but can often be successfully treated by changing to one of the new atypicals. This side effect is usually most troubling due to the embarrassment of the disfiguring movements.

Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome (NMS) – Although rare, this side effect can be life threatening. When it occurs it must be treated immediately. A trip to the emergency room is warranted. In this syndrome, the affected individual becomes rigid, develops a fever, a rapid heartbeat, abnormal blood pressure, rapid breathing, heavy sweating, and changes in mental state ranging from confusion to coma. This can occur with any antipsychotic. Although it usually occurs when starting treatment, it can occur at any time.

Hormone Changes – These medications affect many hormones in the body, especially those pertaining to sexual characteristics and drives. Both men and women may develop enlargement of the breasts and in some cases will discharge fluid from the nipples. They may make you uninterested in sex. Some men have trouble getting or maintaining an erection. Some women have menstrual period irregularities or even a cessation of their menstrual periods altogether. As with all other side effects, it is important to discuss these with your psychiatrist even though it may be uncomfortable for you. Reducing the dosage or changing antipsychotics usually reverses these side effects.

Weight Gain – Antipsychotics lead to weight gain in many individuals. They often increase appetite and reduce the metabolism, meaning that the body burns fewer calories. Although this can happen on any antipsychotic, it seems to be most common in the atypicals Risperdal, Invega, Zyprexa, Seroquel, and Clozaril. It is important to try to maintain a good diet and exercise routine in order to control this side effect.

Blood Count Changes – Antipsychotics can cause a reduction in the white blood cell count (the infection fighting cells). This effect is usually temporary and no cause for concern. In some cases the body will stop producing white blood cells (agranulocytosis), which is a serious cause for concern. This usually occurs in the first few weeks of treatment. Symptoms include a high fever with listlessness or tiredness, a painfully inflamed mouth, a sore throat, and swollen lymph nodes. If this occurs see a doctor immediately. This is especially of concern with the atypical Clozaril. As a result, the FDA has mandated weekly white blood cell counts for the first six months of treatment; every two weeks for the second six months; then monthly after one year. Because of this side effect, Clozaril is usually only used when a patient has not responded to several other antipsychotics.

Seizures – In people prone to seizures, antipsychotics tend to make seizures more likely. In very rare cases, people with no prior history of seizures have them when starting treatment. The medication most likely to cause this is Clozaril.

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