

Clozapine (Cloz-a-peen)

Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

Why have I been prescribed clozapine?

Clozapine is used to help treat schizophrenia. It is often effective where other antipsychotics have not helped. This is sometimes called treatment-resistant schizophrenia. With schizophrenia, many people hear voices of people talking to them or about them. They may also become suspicious or paranoid. Some people have problems with their thinking and feel that other people can read their thoughts. These are called “positive symptoms”. Clozapine can help relieve these symptoms where other antipsychotics have not helped. Many people with schizophrenia also experience “negative symptoms”. They feel tired, lacking in energy, may become quite inactive and withdrawn. Clozapine may help relieve these symptoms as well.



Clozapine also has other advantages over some other antipsychotics. Some people can have really dramatic improvements on clozapine. Older (typical) antipsychotics often cause strange movements and shaking. Clozapine does not cause these. Older drugs also increase levels of the hormone prolactin which affects sexual functioning. Clozapine is unlikely to do this.

What exactly is clozapine?

Schizophrenia and similar disorders are sometimes referred to as psychoses or a psychotic illness, hence the name given to the group of medicines, which is “antipsychotics”. Clozapine is not an ordinary anti-psychotic. It works in a different way and has different side effects. It seems to work very well when other antipsychotics do not. The brand or trade name of clozapine used in Canterbury is ‘Clozaril®’

Is clozapine safe to take?

It is usually safe to take clozapine regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but it doesn’t suit everyone. Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- If you have epilepsy, diabetes, or glaucoma, or suffer from liver, heart, kidney, or prostate trouble.
- If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, or wish to become pregnant.

Why do I need to have some blood tests?

It is a requirement that you have regular blood tests. Clozapine can very rarely lower the numbers of white cells in your blood. White cells are important for fighting infection. If you have too few white cells, it will be harder for your body to fight off an infection. Only three people in every hundred have this bad reaction. It is not related to the dose you take.

To make it safe for you, when you first start taking clozapine, your blood will be tested every week. After the first 18 weeks, you will need a blood test at least every four weeks. Before you start clozapine, your doctor will register you with an approved monitoring company who assist in checking the blood tests have been completed.

How should I take clozapine and what should I do if I miss a dose?

Look at the label on your medicine. It should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. Consult your doctor, pharmacist or case manager before altering the dose. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within a few hours of the usual time.

If you stop clozapine for longer than 48 hours, contact your doctor, pharmacist or case manager straight away. It will be necessary to restart it slowly and return to weekly blood testing.

What will happen to me when I start taking clozapine?

Clozapine does not work straight away. It may take several days or even weeks for some of the symptoms to reduce. To begin with, most people find that this medication will help them feel more relaxed and calm. After two or three weeks, other symptoms should begin to improve. You might get some side effects before you start to feel any better. Most side effects should go away after a few days to weeks. Look at the table over the page. It tells you what to do. Not everyone will get the side effects shown. There are other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

Are there any medicines or foods I should avoid or take care with?

If clozapine is combined with other medicines such as some anticonvulsants and antibiotics, it may increase the risk of reducing the number of white blood cells you have.

Clozapine can be affected if you start or stop smoking. Drinking a lot of caffeine, e.g. energy drinks, tea and coffee can affect your clozapine level as well. Care is also required with some antidepressants and antihistamines so ask your doctor or pharmacist before you start or buy a new medicine.

What about alcohol and marijuana?

It is recommended that people taking clozapine should not drink alcohol or use marijuana or other recreational drugs. When taken with clozapine, these can make some people drowsy. They can also lessen the effect of clozapine and add to side effects of poor co-ordination which can lead to falls or accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol or taking other recreational drugs often makes your psychosis worse or your mood unstable.

Once you are used to your clozapine you can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm. If you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If it doesn't make you feel drowsy and uncoordinated, it is probably okay to drink small amounts.

It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

It is recognised that many road accidents occur because of mixing alcohol, marijuana, synthetic cannabis or party pills with these medicines. Don't stop taking your medication because you fancy a joint or a drink at the weekend.

When I feel better, can I stop taking it?

No. If you stop taking clozapine, your original symptoms may return. You should decide with your doctor when you can come off it. Most people need to be on clozapine for quite a long time, sometimes years. This is not thought to be harmful. Clozapine is not addictive. Unless it is very urgent, you should come off clozapine gradually over at least several weeks.

What is the metabolic syndrome?

Antipsychotics can occasionally cause something called the metabolic syndrome. This is a combination of weight gain, raised cholesterol and raised blood sugars. Some antipsychotics are more likely to cause the metabolic syndrome than others. When you start an antipsychotic, your weight, height and waist circumference will be measured. An ECG and a number of blood tests will be done and these will be repeated several times during the first year that you are on an antipsychotic to ensure that you remain healthy. It is important when you start an antipsychotic that you eat a healthy diet and that you do some exercise. Talk to your case manager or doctor for advice about this. They may also offer to refer you to a dietitian.

What about constipation?

Normally, it takes about a day for food to pass through your gut, but when you're taking clozapine, it can take four days or longer! Get used to thinking about how often you have bowel motions and what they are like. The aim is for you to have regular (i.e. at least every two days) easy to pass bowel movements. Your bowel motions should be soft, smooth and easy to push out.

Because getting constipated on clozapine can lead to serious complications, your doctor will most likely ask you about your bowels at every appointment.

Most people on clozapine need to take laxatives every day to keep their bowels working properly. They are an important part of your treatment and you should not stop taking them without talking to your doctor. Different laxatives work in different ways. You may need laxatives to make your bowel motions softer, or to make your bowel work faster, or both.

You should take your laxatives every day. It takes two to three weeks for your bowels to settle into a new routine. You may get some tummy pain or runny bowel motions (diarrhoea) when you change laxatives. Don't stop taking them unless the pain is severe or the runny bowel motions continues for two or more days.

Fibre based laxatives like bran and psyllium (Metamucil, Konsyl D) are not always helpful because they may overload your bowel.

Side effect	What is it?	What should I do if it happens to me?
COMMON		
Blurred Vision	Things look fuzzy and you can't focus properly.	See your doctor if you are worried.
Constipation	You may feel "bunged up" inside, strain when you go to the toilet, you can't pass a bowel motion or only pass lumpy or hard bowel motions.	Take your laxatives as prescribed. Eat more fruit and vegetables. Do more walking. Make sure you drink plenty of fluid. You should tell your doctor or nurse if: A) You have bad tummy pain. B) You haven't had a bowel motion for three or more days.
Urinary Incontinence	Passing urine involuntarily/ wetting the bed.	Mention this to your doctor. There are medicines that can help with this.
Drowsiness	Feeling sleepy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your clozapine at a different time of the day. This is likely to settle as your body gets
Hypersalivation	Your mouth is full of saliva or spit and you find yourself dribbling. Your pillow may be wet in the morning.	If this annoys you, your doctor can give you something for it. Some people find propping up pillows at night helps a bit. Covering your pillow with a towel may help keep it clean.
Postural Hypotension	Low blood pressure. You may feel faint when you stand up.	Try not to stand up too quickly. If you feel dizzy, don't drive. Tell your treating doctor about this.
Tachycardia	A fast heartbeat. It may feel like palpitations.	Contact your doctor now. It is not usually dangerous.
Weight Gain	Eating more and putting on weight, especially just after starting clozapine.	Try and avoid putting on weight in the first place. Eat a healthy diet full of vegetables and fibre and do physical activities such as walking. Avoid fatty foods like chocolate and crisps, and high sugar foods such as cakes, sweets and fizzy drinks. Ask to see a dietitian if you need help with food choices.

LESS COMMON		
Headache	Head is painful and pounding.	It should be safe to take paracetamol.
Nausea or vomiting	Feeling sick or being sick.	Taking each dose with or after food may help. If it is bad, contact your doctor.
RARE		
Agranulocytosis or Neutropenia	Low numbers of white cells in the blood. You may get more infections.	This should be picked up from your blood tests. Contact your doctor immediately if you have a sore throat, fever or feel unwell in any way.
Fever	A high temperature.	See your doctor as soon as possible. You may need another blood test.
Seizures	Having fits or a blackout.	Stop taking clozapine and contact your doctor now.
Cardiomyopathy and Myocarditis	Feeling tired, 'flu like symptoms, feverish, a fast heartbeat, changes in your breathing or chest pain. Myocarditis rarely occurs in the first couple of months of treatment.	See your doctor as soon as possible.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may also find other books or leaflets useful. If you have access to the internet, you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful as internet-based information is not always accurate.

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