Which antipsychotic is right for me?

Patient information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

**What is an antipsychotic and when are they used?**

An antipsychotic is a medication used to treat mental health illnesses such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, psychosis, mania and bipolar disorder. They also have a role in the treatment of severe depression and severe anxiety.

In schizophrenia, antipsychotics can stop people experiencing hallucinations (the experience of hearing voices or seeing things that aren’t real) and delusions (ideas or beliefs that are not based on reality). They can also help you to think clearly.

**How do antipsychotic medications work?**

Your brain contains chemicals which carry messages from one part of the brain to another. One of these is called dopamine. It is thought that high levels of dopamine may cause the brain to experience hallucinations and delusions. Antipsychotic medications reduce the amount of dopamine that can act in the brain.

**What different antipsychotics are available?**

First generation antipsychotics (typical antipsychotics) include chlorpromazine, flupenthixol, fluphenazine, haloperidol, levomepromazine, trifluoperazine and zuclopenthixol. These were the first types of antipsychotics available and have been used since the 1950s.

Second generation antipsychotics (atypical antipsychotics) include amisulpride, aripiprazole, clozapine, olanzapine, paliperidone, quetiapine, risperidone, and ziprasidone. These medications have been used since the 1990s.

Antipsychotics are available as tablets, liquids and long acting injections. A long acting injection is given once every 2 to 4 weeks and releases slowly over this time. The advantages of this are that you don’t have to remember to take a tablet every day and it produces a consistent level of the drug in your body. A disadvantage is that a change in the dose can take a while to work. So if a particular dose is giving you side effects, it may take some time to notice the effect of a dose reduction.
What about the side effects from antipsychotics?

The most common side effects from first generation antipsychotics are movement disorders. These may include stiffness and shakiness, feeling sluggish and slow in your thinking, and restlessness (akathisia). These are known as extra-pyramidal side effects. Second generation antipsychotics are less likely to cause these movement disorders but are more likely to cause weight gain, increased cholesterol in the blood, and an increased risk of developing diabetes.

While side effects of antipsychotics can be troublesome, there is a range of antipsychotics to choose from. Sometimes one medication causes side effects in some people, but not in others. Sometimes side effects can be useful, for example sedation from an antipsychotic may be useful to improve sleep. Below is a table giving a rough guide and comparison of the types of side effects of antipsychotics. You may find this table helpful in picking an antipsychotic that would be best for you. Please discuss your choice with your psychiatrist. See the glossary for an explanation of some medical terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>Sleepiness</th>
<th>Weight Gain</th>
<th>Diabetes</th>
<th>Unusual movement(^1)</th>
<th>Anticholinergic(^2)</th>
<th>Hypotension(^3)</th>
<th>Prolactin elevation(^4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amisulpride</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aripiprazole</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chlorpromazine</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clozapine</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flupenthixol</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluphenazine</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haloperidol</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levomepromazine</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olanzapine</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paliperidone</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quetiapine</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risperidone</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trifluoperazine</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziprasidone</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuclopenthixol</td>
<td>*****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very common</th>
<th>*****</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very uncommon</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common</td>
<td>****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not expected to be a problem</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncommon</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Glossary**

1. **Unusual Movement (Extra-pyramidal symptoms)**
   These side effects include stiffness, shakiness and restlessness. Very rarely they can cause the eyes to move in an unusual way.

2. **Anticholinergic side effects**
   These side effects include a dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, decreased sweating, confusion, concentration problems and problems peeing.

3. **Hypotension**
   This is low blood pressure which can lead to dizziness and fainting. It can be a problem when you stand up too quickly.

4. **Prolactin elevation**
   Prolactin is a hormone in the brain. When levels are increased, it can cause sexual side effects, such as: women no longer having their monthly period, a lack of sex drive in men and women, breast enlargement in men and women, and erection and ejaculation problems in men.
Which is the best antipsychotic?

It is thought that all of the antipsychotics work roughly as well as each other. There are slight differences between the antipsychotics, your doctor will be able to explain these. Clozapine, however, is an exception. It is more effective than the other antipsychotics in keeping people well when they have schizophrenia. Clozapine is reserved for more difficult to treat schizophrenia.

How might your doctor decide which antipsychotic to use?

Your doctor uses information from many sources to decide which antipsychotic to prescribe for you and how much you should take. They will also want your views on which antipsychotic you feel is best. It can be difficult to tell which antipsychotic will work well for you as an individual. If one does not work as expected, a different one is often tried and that may work better.

How well do antipsychotics work?

Evidence shows that about 4 out of 5 people with schizophrenia will benefit from taking an antipsychotic. Unfortunately, antipsychotics may not always make symptoms go away completely, but can improve symptoms enough to improve your quality of life.

Are antipsychotics safe for me?

It is usually safe to take an antipsychotic as prescribed by your doctor, but they may not 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, Parkinson's disease or glaucoma, or suffer from heart, liver, kidney, thyroid or prostate trouble.
- If you are pregnant, breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant.

When I feel better can I stop taking my antipsychotic?

No. If you stop taking your antipsychotic your original symptoms may return. This may occur quickly but may sometimes take up to three to six months after you stop your antipsychotic. You and your doctor should decide together when you can stop your antipsychotic. Stopping an antipsychotic should not be done suddenly, and instead the medication should be stopped slowly over a number of weeks. It is important to note that many people need to keep taking an antipsychotic in the long term, even if they feel well.

Are antipsychotics addictive?

No. Most people need to take an antipsychotic for quite a long time, often years. This is not thought to be harmful. In patients with schizophrenia there is good evidence that if you take your antipsychotic regularly you will live longer and have a better quality of life.
What about alcohol and marijuana?

It is recommended that people taking an antipsychotic do not drink alcohol, use marijuana, synthetic cannabis or take party pills (‘herbal highs’). Alcohol, marijuana, synthetic cannabis and party pills can lessen the effect of antipsychotics and add to side effects of poor co-ordination and drowsiness which can lead to falls or accidents. As well as this, they often make your psychosis worse, or your mood unstable.

Once you are used to your antipsychotic 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 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 and marijuana with these medicines. Don’t stop taking your antipsychotic just because you fancy a joint or a drink at the weekend. If you do decide to drink or take drugs, think about how you will keep yourself safe.

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 girth 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.

There is special programme called “Equally Well” in Canterbury so that people who take antipsychotics long term can see their GP up to four times a year for free.

Where can I find further information?

If you would like more information you can discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist. If you have access to the internet, you may find a lot of information there, but be careful as internet based information is not always accurate. Some websites that you may find useful are:

www.healthinfo.org.nz
www.medsafe.govt.nz
www.mymedicines.co.nz

Hilmorton Hospital Pharmacy,
Annex Road, Christchurch
Telephone: (03) 339 1169

Ref. 238717 Authorised by: Chairman, Pharmacy Committee, SMHS April 2018