

Which antipsychotic is right for me?

Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

What is an antipsychotic and when are they used?

An antipsychotic is a medicine used to treat mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, psychosis, mania and bipolar disorder. They are also sometimes used to treat severe depression and severe anxiety.

In schizophrenia, antipsychotics can stop people having hallucinations (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 medicines 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 have hallucinations and delusions. Antipsychotic medicines reduce the amount of dopamine that can work in the brain.

What different antipsychotics are available?

First generation antipsychotics (typical antipsychotics) include chlorpromazine, flupenthixol, haloperidol, levomepromazine, 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 medicines have been used since the 1990s.

Antipsychotics are available as tablets, liquids and long acting injections. Some benefits and drawbacks of these are:

| Long-acting injection | Tablet or liquid |
|---|--|
| Given once every 2 to 4 weeks (One type of injection only needs to be given once every three months). | Having to remember to take it every day |
| Releases slowly over this time to give a consistent level of the medicine in your body | Medicine level goes up and down with each dose |
| It takes a while to see the effect of changing your dose | The effect of changing your dose is quicker |
| If your dose gets lowered or the medicine is stopped because of a side | If your dose gets lowered or the medicine is stopped because of a side |

effect, it may take some time to see a change

effect, it may be quicker to see a change

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 medicine causes side effects in some people, but not in others. Sometimes side effects can be useful, for example feeling tired from an antipsychotic may be useful to improve sleep. In general, antipsychotics are well tolerated and not everyone gets side effects from them.

This table gives a rough guide and comparison of the types of side effects of antipsychotics. You may find it helpful to choose 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.

| Drug | Sleepiness | Weight Gain | Diabetes | Unusual movement 1 | Anti-cholinergic 2 | Low blood pressure 3 | High/more prolactin 4 |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Amisulpride | * | *** | *** | *** | * | * | ***** |
| Aripiprazole | * | * * | * | * | * | * | * |
| Chlorpromazine | ***** | **** | **** | **** | **** | ***** | ***** |
| Clozapine | ***** | ***** | ***** | * | **** * | ***** | * |
| Flupenthixol | *** | **** | *** | **** | **** | *** | ***** |
| Fluphenazine | *** | *** | *** | ***** | **** | *** | ***** |
| Haloperidol | *** | *** | ** | ***** | *** | *** | ***** |
| Levomepromazine | ***** | **** | **** | **** | **** | *** | **** |
| Olanzapine | **** | ***** | ***** | ** | *** | *** | *** |
| Paliperidone | *** | **** | *** | *** | *** | **** | ***** |
| Quetiapine | **** | **** | **** | * | *** | **** | * |
| Risperidone | *** | **** | *** | *** | *** | **** | ***** |
| Trifluoperazine | *** | *** | ** | ***** | ** | *** | ***** |
| Ziprasidone | *** | * | * | ** | *** | *** | ** |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|------|
| Zuclopenthixol | **** | **** | *** | **** | *** | *** | **** |
|----------------|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|------|

| Key | | | |
|-------------|------|------------------------------|----|
| Very common | **** | Very uncommon | ** |
| Common | **** | Not expected to be a problem | * |
| Uncommon | *** | | |

Glossary

| | |
|--|---|
| 1) Unusual Movement (Extra-pyramidal symptoms) | These side effects include stiffness, shakiness and restlessness. Very rarely can they 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) Low blood pressure | This can lead to dizziness and fainting. It can be a problem when you stand up too quickly. |
| 4) High/more prolactin | Prolactin is a hormone in the brain. When levels are increased, it can cause sexual side effects, such as: females no longer having their monthly period, a lack of sex drive, breast enlargement in males and females, and erection and ejaculation problems in males. |

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 and 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 kept for more difficult to treat schizophrenia because it needs special monitoring to keep people well.

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 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?

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 want to get 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 medicine should be stopped slowly over a number of weeks.

It is important to note that many people need to keep taking an antipsychotic 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 people 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 such as poor co-ordination and drowsiness. This 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 medicine.

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 contribute to 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 size will be measured. You will have a heart test called an ECG and a number of blood tests. These will be repeated several times during the first year that you are on an antipsychotic to make sure that you stay 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.

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. 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

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