



Antipsychotic Medications

What is an antipsychotic?

An antipsychotic is a medication that is used to help treat psychotic symptoms. Psychotic symptoms involve distortions of reality and can include symptoms such as hallucinations, extreme paranoia or fear and disorganised thinking. These symptoms can occur in a range of mental illnesses that include schizophrenia, depression and mania.

There are two main types of antipsychotics, these are the “atypical” or newer antipsychotics and the “typical” or older antipsychotics.

“Typical” Antipsychotics	“Atypical” Antipsychotics
Chlorpromazine (Largactil™)	Amisulpride (Solian™)
Flupenthixol (Fluanxol™)	Aripiprazole (Abilify™)
Fluphenazine (Modecate™)	Clozapine (Clopine™) (Clozaril™)
Haloperidol (Serenace™) (Haldol™)	Olanzapine (Zyprexa™)
Trifluoperazine (Stelazine™)	Paliperidone (Invega™)
Zuclopentixol (Clopixol™)	Quetiapine (Seroquel™) Risperidone (Risperdal™) Ziprasidone (Zeldox™)

The main advantage of the atypical antipsychotics is that they are less likely to cause side effects such as muscle stiffness, restlessness or involuntary movements, which can be more likely with the typical antipsychotics. The main disadvantages of atypical antipsychotics are weight gain and increased risk of diabetes and heart disease. Therefore it is especially important to watch your diet, weight and exercise if taking these medications. Some people find that the typical antipsychotics are more suitable for them.

Most antipsychotics are available in an oral (tablet) form. Some antipsychotics come as a long-acting injection (depot).

How do they work?

Antipsychotic medications help to restore an imbalance in the brain’s natural chemicals, in particular dopamine.

How long do they take to work?

Some of the effects of antipsychotic medications can occur as early as the first week of treatment, with relief of agitation and sleep problems. Generally, improvements in psychotic symptoms can take up to 6 weeks after starting treatment, while the full benefits may take several months.

How should I take the medication?

You should take the medication as prescribed by your doctor. It is a good idea to have a routine e.g. take your medication every night after your meal, or cleaning your teeth, or before getting into bed. If you have forgotten to take your medication, you should take it as soon as possible (provided this is within a few hours of the usual time you would take your medication). Otherwise, you should wait until the next dose is due and only take the usual amount. **Do not** try to catch up by doubling the amount if you miss a dose.

You should continue taking the medication, even if you are feeling well. Many people prescribed antipsychotics need to take them for a period of months to even years, to prevent a relapse of their symptoms. You should never just stop taking your medication suddenly without medical advice as this could lead to a relapse and potentially, an unplanned admission to hospital. One of the aims of psychiatric treatment is to keep you well and safe. If you have any concerns about your prescribed medication you should discuss these with your doctor.



What about other medications?

You should tell your doctor about any other medications that you are taking, including natural remedies and medications you have purchased without a prescription.

Your doctor may prescribe other medications in addition to the antipsychotic to assist with symptoms such as mood swings, low mood, sleep problems, anxiety and muscle stiffness.

What precautions should I take?

You should avoid extremely hot and humid environments as the medication may affect your body's ability to regulate its temperature and blood pressure.

Antipsychotic medications can increase the effects of alcohol.

Some antipsychotic medications can cause abnormal movements of your tongue, mouth, fingers, or feet. If you have this experience you should discuss this with your doctor so that your medication can be reviewed.

Some antipsychotics can make you feel drowsy or slow you down so you should not drive a car or operate machinery if you experience these effects. Alternatively, you should tell your doctor if you experience these side-effects as you may need to change medication.

Cigarette smoking can affect the levels of the medication in your bloodstream so it is important to let your doctor know about changes in your smoking habits.

Published: November 2009.



Some antipsychotic medications are not safe in pregnancy. You should consult your doctor about the risks and benefits of your medication if you wish to become pregnant.

What are some of the common side-effects I might experience?

Side Effect	Treatment
Drowsiness/Fatigue	This is usually worse when the medication is first commenced and improves with time. Your doctor may recommend that you take the medication before bed. Avoid driving a car or operating machinery if drowsiness persists.
Dizziness	Sit up slowly from a lying position, dangle your legs over the edge of the bed for a few minutes before standing up. If dizziness persists or if you feel faint then contact your doctor.
Muscle stiffness, restlessness, involuntary movements	Tell your doctor if you experience any of these effects. You may be prescribed an extra medication to help reduce these side-effects.
Dry mouth	Sucking on ice cubes can increase the saliva in your mouth. Drink water and brush your teeth regularly.
Blurred vision	This can occur at the start of treatment and usually gets better after 1-2 weeks. Let your doctor know if your vision becomes blurred.

Constipation	Increase the amount of fibre in your diet (wholegrain foods, fruits and vegetables). Drink plenty of fluids and exercise regularly. Talk to your doctor about other strategies if this remains a problem.
Weight changes	Monitor your food intake and try not to have snacks between meals. Maintain a healthy diet and avoid foods that have a high fat content or lots of sugars. Establish a regular exercise regime.
Nausea or heartburn	If this happens, take the medication with food.
Change in sexual ability/desire	Discuss with your doctor about other medications without this side-effect and which may be an appropriate alternative for you.

(adapted from Prof D. Castle and N Tran: Psychiatric Medication Information, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne February 2008)



This brochure contains general information and does not include all possible side effects or all brand names of medications.

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