
Managing mental health medications

Summary

- There are six main types of mental health drugs that treat different illnesses. Some psychiatric medications work in a few hours, some take weeks or months to become effective.
 - Although powerful, mental health drugs are designed for specific conditions and it is important to take them as directed. Sudden stopping of medication can be dangerous.
 - Side effects can include: headaches, dizziness, nausea, weight gain, dry mouth, cramps, loss of sex drive and sleep problems. Talk to your doctor if you are experiencing side effects.
 - To help you remember which medication and which dosage to take, put a list of everything you take and when on the fridge, or put your tablets into pill boxes, or put reminders in your mobile phone.
 - Contact Centrelink to find out if you are eligible for a healthcare or other concessions that will allow you to get extra assistance to pay for medication.
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It is important to remember that medications do not cure mental health conditions. They can make your symptoms of mental illness go away or affect you less, but if you stop taking them, your symptoms may come back. If something about your mental health medication bothers you, it is important that you talk with your doctor or counsellor about it before you stop taking any medication as suddenly stopping the taking of medications can cause unwanted side effects.

Types of mental health medication

There are six main types of mental health medications:

- **antidepressants** – used to treat depression, anxiety and some types of personality disorders
- **antipsychotics** – used to treat schizophrenia and sometimes bipolar disorder and to help restore your brain's chemical balance
- **mood stabilisers** – often used to treat people with bipolar disorder
- **depressants** – used to help people become or stay calm.
- **anxiolytics** – often used to treat anxiety disorders
- **stimulants** – used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

How long will it take for mental health medications to work

Stimulants and anxiolytics start working quickly — within a few hours or even less. They stay in your body for a relatively short time.

Antidepressant medications usually take around two weeks for you to feel the benefits. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for further information or view the drug information sheets now available online for further details. The effects of drugs can vary for different people depending on their body size and metabolism. Your doctor will want to see you two or three weeks after you start taking them to check that they are having an impact on your illness.

Antipsychotics take between six weeks and up to a few months for their full effects to work. If you are prescribed antipsychotics, your doctor will want to see you regularly to check how you are going.

It is important to be honest and open with your doctor about how you have felt since starting medication. You might feel shy or embarrassed to tell them personal things to do with your emotions and your body, but they have been trained to deal with sensitive issues. See the page '[Talking to your doctor about sensitive issues](#)' for advice on how to be open and honest with your doctor.

Side effects and long-term impacts of mental health medications

Most mental health or psychiatric medications have side effects. The most common ones are:

- headaches
- weight gain
- dizziness
- dry mouth
- muscle spasms and cramps
- nausea
- loss of sex drive
- constipation
- sleepiness or problems sleeping.

Tell your doctor if you have any of these symptoms or any others that you did not have before taking the medication.

Some drugs can have other effects if you take them for a long time. Anxiolytics like Valium are addictive and if used for too long can do things like:

- make you depressed or paranoid
- change your personality
- give you headaches and nausea
- make you gain weight
- damage your memory.

How medications mix with other things in your body

The chemicals in your medications can interact with chemicals in other things you are taking — even if it is just paracetamol for a headache or vitamin tablets. Because of this, it is really important to tell your doctor everything that you are taking.

Make sure you tell them about any other medicines, vitamins or herbal supplements you take, as well as what you have been eating and drinking, especially alcohol.

Medication in hospital and at home

When you are admitted to hospital, it is usually because you are seriously ill and need extra treatment to get well. While you are in hospital, you are usually given different types and doses of medication to what you might have been taking or will be prescribed once you are well enough to go home. You also have people giving you your medications when you need them. Once you are home you need to manage your medication use.

Once you are home, it is really easy to forget to take the right medications and dosage at the right time, and you might not have people with you all the time to remind you. Some things you can do to help remember to take your medication at the right time and right dosage include:

- make a schedule of the week with names of drugs, the dose, and what day and time each should be taken, and put it on the fridge
- put your tablets into pill boxes with labels for the time of day and day of the week they can be taken
- put reminders or appointments into your phone for when you need to take each drug.

Keep regular appointments with your doctor or counsellor so that you can all keep track of how you are going and how your medications are working for you.

Paying for medication

Australia's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) is the government program that provides affordable medications to all those covered by Medicare. **Understanding Medicare** the scheme subsidises a wide range of approved prescription medications, including those used to treat mental illness.

Australian citizens, New Zealand citizens living in Australia and most permanent residents of Australia are covered by Medicare and the PBS. If you are not sure if you are eligible, visit or call a Medicare office to find out if you are covered.

If you are visiting from overseas, you might be covered by one of Australia's Reciprocal Health Care Agreements. Each country has a different arrangement with the Australian government, so it is important to find out what you are covered for and what the conditions are.

Australian citizens may be eligible for a concession card from the Department of Human Services, which can give you a discount on medication.

Where to get help

- Your doctor (GP)
- Your pharmacist
- **Medicine information leaflets for consumers**

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