Antipsychotic medications

Antipsychotic medications are drugs that help to treat conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. They work by helping to reduce symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, and disorganised thinking.

Types of antipsychotic medications

There are different types of antipsychotic medications, and the choice of medication can depend on the individual's needs and medical history.

- Typical antipsychotics: These are older medications that work by blocking the action of dopamine in the brain. They include medications such as haloperidol and chlorpromazine.
- Atypical antipsychotics: These are newer medications that work by blocking the action of dopamine and serotonin in the brain. They include medications such as clozapine, quetiapine, and risperidone.

Side effects of antipsychotic medications

Antipsychotic medications can cause side effects, including:

- Weight gain
- Sedation
- Increased risk of diabetes and high cholesterol
- Movement disorders

It's important to discuss with your healthcare provider any concerns you may have about the side effects of antipsychotic medications.

How to take antipsychotic medications

Antipsychotic medications are usually taken by mouth, but they can also be given by injection. It's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions for how to take the medication.

Possible interactions with other medications

Antipsychotic medications can interact with other medications, so it's important to let your healthcare provider know about any other medications you are taking.

Antipsychotic medications may also interact with food. It's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions for when to take the medication in relation to food.

Antipsychotic medications and breastfeeding

Antipsychotic medications can pass into breast milk, so it's important to let your healthcare provider know if you are breastfeeding.

Antipsychotic medications and pregnancy

Antipsychotic medications should be used during pregnancy only if the benefits outweigh the risks. It's important to let your healthcare provider know if you are planning to become pregnant.

Antipsychotic medications and driving and other activities

Antipsychotic medications can cause side effects such as drowsiness and dizziness, which can affect the ability to drive or operate machinery. It's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions for any recommendations about driving and other activities.

Antipsychotic medications and alcohol

Antipsychotic medications can interact with alcohol, so it's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions for any recommendations about alcohol.

Antipsychotic medications and other recreational drugs

Antipsychotic medications can interact with other recreational drugs, so it's important to let your healthcare provider know if you are using any other recreational drugs.

Antipsychotic medications and other conditions

Antipsychotic medications can affect other conditions, so it's important to let your healthcare provider know if you have any other medical conditions.

Antipsychotic medications and therapy

Antipsychotic medications can affect therapy, so it's important to let your healthcare provider know if you are receiving any therapy.

Antipsychotic medications and consumers

Antipsychotic medications are important medications, but it's important to take them as prescribed and to follow your healthcare provider's instructions. It's important to let your healthcare provider know if you have any questions or concerns about antipsychotic medications.
Antipsychotic medications

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Summary

- Although antipsychotic medications don’t cure mental illnesses, they can reduce or even eliminate symptoms.
- The new generation of antipsychotic medications has fewer side effects.

Antipsychotic medications (also referred to as neuroleptics or major tranquillisers) may reduce or eliminate symptoms of psychosis. They are not a ‘cure’ for mental illnesses, but can be an effective part of treatment. Psychosis can be caused by any one of a number of illnesses that affect the brain and cause the person to lose contact with reality. Some examples include schizophrenia and bipolar mood disorder.

During a psychotic episode, the person may experience delusions, hallucinations or thought disturbances. Antipsychotic medications work to minimise these symptoms. A person should begin to feel better within six weeks of starting to take antipsychotic medication. However, it can take several months before they feel the full benefits.

Antipsychotic medications and psychotic symptoms

Medical research has shown that symptoms of psychosis are associated with changes in brain chemistry. Antipsychotic medications help to restore the brain’s natural chemical balance, thereby reducing or getting rid of the psychotic symptoms. The medication can take some weeks before starting to work.

Types of antipsychotic medications

There are two types of antipsychotic medications. These are known as:

- Typical – the older type of medications
- Atypical – the newer type of medications.

While both are effective, in general, the newer medications have several advantages over the older ones, including:

- Fewer side effects such as trembling or stiffening of muscles
- Less risk of developing ‘tardive dyskinesia’ – uncontrolled movement of the person’s mouth, tongue and sometimes, other parts of the body.

Some evidence suggests that the atypical medications may be effective in improving a person’s overall mood, thinking and motivation. Although these newer antipsychotic medications are more commonly used than the older ones, some people find that the older medications suit them better.

Injections or depot medication for psychotic symptoms

Depot medication is given by injection, which releases the drug slowly over some weeks. Some people prefer injections as they find it difficult to remember to take tablets. Some people are required to take depot medication as a condition of a court community-treatment order.

It is important to discuss with your doctor the different treatment options available, and which of them might be the best for you.

Side effects of antipsychotic medications

Common side effects of antipsychotic medications include:

- Drowsiness
- Weight gain
- Loss of menstrual periods in women
- A drop in blood pressure when standing up, which can cause dizziness
- Stiffness or trembling in muscles.
Other possible side effects include:

- Constipation
- Fluid retention
- Sexual problems
- Dry mouth
- Headaches.

It is important to remember that the same medication can affect different people in different ways. Not everyone will have the same unwanted side effects.

**Discuss antipsychotic medication side effects with your doctor**

Medication side effects can be worrying. You should immediately discuss any side effects with your doctor. To manage or reduce side effects, your doctor may:

- Change the dose you take
- Prescribe another medication
- Suggest that you change the time of day the medication is taken.

You can also manage weight gain with advice about diet and exercise.

**Medication after a psychotic episode**

After you have had a psychotic episode, ‘maintenance’ doses of an antipsychotic medication are important to minimise the risk of further episodes. If you suddenly stop taking antipsychotic medication against your doctor’s advice, you may have a return of psychotic symptoms.

**Other treatments for psychotic illnesses**

Taking antipsychotic medication is one important step in getting better, but this is rarely enough on its own. As well as medication, effective treatment for schizophrenia and related disorders usually includes ongoing clinical support in the community, psychological therapies, education about the illness and how to deal with it, psychosocial rehabilitation, and accommodation and employment support.

**Where to get help**

- SANE Helpline Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263) (Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm)
- Need Help? Chat live with a SANE Helpline Advisor (Available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm AEST)
- Your doctor
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

**Things to remember**

- Although antipsychotic medications don’t cure mental illnesses, they can reduce or even eliminate symptoms.
- The new generation of antipsychotic medications has fewer side effects.

**References**

- *The SANE guide to medication and other treatments*, SANE Australia, Melbourne. [More information here.](#)

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Mental illness explained

- Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives.

- Forensic mental health
  Forensic mental health services provide assessment and treatment of people with a mental disorder and a history of criminal offending, or those who are at risk of offending.

- Let’s talk about depression in men
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

- Mental health first aid
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- Mental health laws and compulsory patients
  If you are a compulsory patient under the Mental Health Act, you have rights and there are people who can help you...

- Mental illness explained
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness.

- Mental illness treatments
  The correct treatment for mental illness can help a person's condition to improve or help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms.

Types of mental illness

- Anxiety disorders
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people.

- Bipolar disorder
  Bipolar disorder is a type of psychosis, which means the person's perception of reality is altered. It is characterised by extreme mood swings.

- Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)
  People with body dysmorphic disorder constantly worry about the way they look.

- Borderline personality disorder
  People with borderline personality disorder may exhibit extreme behaviour, such as repeated self-mutilation or taking overdoses of medication.

- Depression explained
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support.

- Eating disorders
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

- Heart disease and mental health
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

- Munchausen syndrome
  Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient fakes illness to gain attention and sympathy.

- Obsessive compulsive disorder
  Obsessive compulsive disorder can have a profound effect on a person's life.

- Panic attack
  Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling.

- Paranoia
  Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are 'out to get you' or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others.

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event...

- **Psychosis**
  In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused...  

- **Schizoaffective disorder**
  Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia...  

- **Schizophrenia**
  People with schizophrenia do not have 'split personalities' and they are not intellectually disabled...  

- **Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis**
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem...  

**Eating disorders**

- **Anorexia nervosa**
  A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages...  

- **Binge eating disorder**
  You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment...  

- **Bulimia nervosa**
  Understanding the warning signs of bulimia nervosa and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery...  

**Support, services and treatment**

- **Antipsychotic medications**
  Antipsychotic medications don’t cure mental illnesses, but they can reduce, or even eliminate, symptoms...  

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy**
  Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving...  

- **Counsellors**
  Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor...  

- **Early signs and intervention with mental illness**
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...  

- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)**
  ECT can be an effective treatment for some types of mental illness...  

- **Mental health care plans**
  A mental health care plan explains the support provided by each member of a person's healthcare team...  

- **Mental health first aid**
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...  

- **Mental health problems - early care helps**
  If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early...
Living with mental illness

10 tips for living with depression
Try to do some activity every day... 10 tips for living with depression...

10 tips to improve your mental fitness
The brain is like a muscle – if you don’t give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical...

About mental health services in Victoria (video)
Victorian mental health services provide expert advice and support for people of all ages...

Alzheimer's disease - Early signs (video)
Family and friends of people with Alzheimer’s disease discuss their experiences and how to recognise the early signs...

Eating disorders and adolescents
Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what’s happening in their life...

Eating disorders - support for families
You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder...

Heart disease and mental health
Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

Let's talk about depression in men
Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

Mental health first aid
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Mental illness and violence
People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community...

Mental illness - family and friends
You can do a lot to help your friend or relative with a mental illness, but you need to look after yourself too...

Strong relationships, strong health
Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

Suicide prevention

Early signs and intervention with mental illness
Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives...

Mental health first aid
We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

Suicide
In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for males and females aged between 15 and 44. We can all play a role in preventing suicide by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out...

Suicide and mental illness
A suicide attempt may be an early warning sign that a person is developing a mental illness.

- Suicide - family and friends
  The grief felt by family and friends can be deeper when the cause of death is suicide.

- Youth suicide - the warning sign
  All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide.

Related Information

- Psychoanalysis
  Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past.

- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and menopause
  Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can reduce menopausal symptoms, but the benefits and risks need to be considered carefully.

- Cognitive behaviour therapy
  Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving.

- Forensic mental health
  Forensic mental health services provide assessment and treatment of people with a mental disorder and a history of criminal offending, or those who are at risk of offending.

- Mental health laws and compulsory patients
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Home

Related information on other websites

- NPS Medicine Wise – General inquiries
- NPS MedicineWise – Medicine finder
- SANE Australia

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