

MEDICATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Medication is most often used to manage symptoms of mental disorder. Research has shown that frequently medication combined with therapy achieves more effective results than simply using medication alone. Medication helps to relieve symptoms, while therapy assists the individual to develop strategies designed to better manage their illness and to improve their quality of life.

Medication for a psychological condition should only be prescribed by a General Practitioner or Psychiatrist¹.

Types of psychiatric medications

There is a range of prescription medication used in the treatment of mental illness.

- **Anti-anxiety medications.** Usually to relieve symptoms of fear and anxiety. These medications are highly effective and some begin to work in just 30 to 90 minutes.
- **Antidepressants.** Used to treat major depression and other mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders. Typically it takes several weeks for this medication to have an effect and it is required for at least 6 months (and sometimes indefinitely) to prevent recurrence and/or worsening of symptoms.
- **Antipsychotics.** Used mainly to control symptoms (hallucinations / delusions) associated with psychosis, a severe mental condition in which the patient loses contact with reality, especially in those patients who suffer from schizophrenia. May take anywhere from days to weeks to begin working.
- **Mood stabilisers.** Used mainly to treat bipolar disorder; more commonly known as manic-depressive disorder.
- **Central nervous system (CNS) stimulant medications.** Used in treating children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Individual differences and psychiatric medications

Factors such as age, gender, body size, genetics, physical illnesses, diet and other lifestyle factors impact on how a person reacts to medication. Your General Practitioner / Psychiatrist will monitor the effectiveness of the medication through regular reviews of your progress. Depending on how you are going the medication will be adjusted or even changed to a different sort sometimes. This is because it is common for certain types of medications to work for some patients and not for others. Sometimes a combination of

¹ In general terms, one of the key differences between psychologists and psychiatrists is that psychiatrists have a medical degree and are therefore able to prescribe medication. A psychiatrist (and/or General Practitioner) will deal with the more severe mental disorders that require long-term therapy and medication. A psychologist focuses on helping the individual to develop strategies to change beliefs and behaviours that might be detrimental to their quality of life. Psychological treatment is often not as lengthy as psychiatric treatment.

medications is required to achieve the best outcome for you. The length of time you will need to take medication depends on the nature and severity of your symptoms.

Potential side effects of psychiatric medications²

Different medications have different side effects, therefore, it is important that you ask your doctor to clearly explain the potential side effects of any medication being prescribed for you. An information sheet giving clear guidelines on what the medication does, its use and potential side effects is always included in the medication packaging and copies are available through your doctor. In the main, common side effects include:

- Drowsiness
- Balance problems and dizziness
- Dry mucous membranes (especially those inside the mouth).

In some cases, stopping a psychiatric medication abruptly can worsen side effects or create new symptoms as the body goes into a form of withdrawal. Therefore, it is best that you discuss any lingering concerns about your medication directly with your doctor before changing your medication schedule in any way.

Do not stop taking your medication or change your medication schedule before consulting your doctor.

Remember that most side effects are *transient* (they improve or go away after a week or two) and *dose-related* (they improve with a reduced dose and worsen when the dosage is increased). Your prescribing doctor will work with you to adjust your medication to minimise any unpleasant side effects.

Symptoms of medication overdose

Symptoms of overdose can be similar to the medication's side effects, but are usually more severe. Typical overdose symptoms include:

- seizures,
- hallucinations,
- disorientation, and
- loss of consciousness.

Symptoms vary depending upon the medication, but they should be taken seriously, as overdosing on some forms of psychiatric medication can be fatal.

Questions to ask to be better informed about your medication

² For more information on psychiatric medications, including use with elderly or very young (children) people, or during pregnancy see <http://emotional.health.ivillage.com/psychiatricmedications/psychiatricmedications9.cfm> (accessed January 2008).

When discussing medications make sure you tell the doctor about all of the prescribed medications (including dosage), over-the-counter medications, and vitamin, mineral, and herbal supplements you already take as there can sometimes be a reaction between these and some psychiatric medications. The list should include herbal teas and supplements such as St. John's wort, echinacea, ginkgo, ephedra, and ginseng.³

Questions you may find useful to ask include:⁴

1. What is the name of the medication, and what is it supposed to do?
2. How and when do I take it, and when do I stop taking it?
3. What foods, drinks, or other medications should I avoid while taking the prescribed medication?
4. Should it be taken with food or on an empty stomach?
5. Is it safe to drink alcohol while on this medication?
6. What are the side effects, and what should I do if they occur?
7. How soon after taking the medication will I notice improvement in my symptoms?
8. Many people find therapy beneficial - is this something your doctor thinks may be helpful for you?

Monitoring

Your doctor will review your progress on a regular basis. Prior to each follow up visit, you can help in this process by listing any symptoms and side effects that you have experienced since your last appointment. This will assist the doctor to assess how well (or otherwise) your treatment is working.

Conclusion

Not all mental disorders require medication, however, depending on the severity and nature of symptoms, using psychiatric medication to treat specific mental illnesses, especially in combination with therapy, has generally been found to be useful. To ensure you are comfortable with your medication you should spend the necessary time with your medical practitioner to understand the purpose of the medication, any potential side effects, and other important features of the drug prior to starting to use it. Equally, getting the best out of your treatment regime requires you to subsequently maintain open communication with your doctor about your experience with the medication.

³ Adapted from <http://www.nmha.org/farcry/go/information/medication/medication-information#ptdep4> (accessed January 2008).

⁴ Adapted from http://www.psychiatry24x7.com/bgdisplay.jhtml?itemname=your_doctor&page=ecall (accessed January 2008).