**Common Medications Used to Treat Mental Illness**

Medications are often an important component of treating many forms of mental illness. However, it is unlikely that medication alone will be effective in "getting over" or stabilizing one's mental illness. Professionals generally recommend an integrated approach to treatment which includes other forms therapy along with medications to manage mental illness most effectively.

Below is a summary of information about the medications most commonly used to treat major mental illness. This information is excerpted from the website of the National Institute of Mental Health. You can find more detailed information at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/mental-health-medications/index.shtml>.

**What are psychiatric medications?**

Psychiatric medications treat mental disorders. Sometimes called psychotropic or psychotherapeutic medications, they have changed the lives of people with mental disorders for the better. Many people with mental disorders live fulfilling lives with the help of these medications. Without them, people with mental disorders might suffer serious and disabling symptoms.

**How are medications used to treat mental disorders?**

Medications treat the symptoms of mental disorders. They cannot cure the disorder, but they make people feel better so they can function.

Medications work differently for different people. Some people get great results from medications and only need them for a short time. For example, a person with depression may feel much better after taking a medication for a few months, and may never need it again. People with disorders like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, or people who have long-term or severe depression or anxiety may need to take medication for a much longer time.

Some people get side effects from medications and other people don't. Doses can be small or large, depending on the medication and the person. Factors that can affect how medications work in people include:

* Type of mental disorder, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia
* Age, sex, and body size
* Physical illnesses
* Habits like smoking and drinking
* Liver and kidney function
* Genetics
* Other medications and herbal/vitamin supplements
* Diet
* Whether medications are taken as prescribed

**Schizophrenia**

Antipsychotic medications are used to treat schizophrenia and schizophrenia-related disorders. Some of these medications have been available since the mid-1950's. They are also called conventional "typical" antipsychotics. Some of the more commonly used medications include:

* Chlorpromazine (Thorazine)
* Haloperidol (Haldol)
* Perphenazine (generic only)
* Fluphenazine (generic only).

In the 1990's, new antipsychotic medications were developed. These new medications are called second generation, or "atypical" antipsychotics.

One of these medications was clozapine (Clozaril). It is a very effective medication that treats psychotic symptoms, hallucinations, and breaks with reality, such as when a person believes he or she is the president.

Other atypical antipsychotics include:

* Risperidone (Risperdal)
* Olanzapine (Zyprexa)
* Quetiapine (Seroquel)
* Ziprasidone (Geodon)
* Aripiprazole (Abilify)
* Paliperidone (Invega).

**What are the side effects?**

Some people have side effects when they start taking these medications. Most side effects go away after a few days and often can be managed successfully. People who are taking antipsychotics should not drive until they adjust to their new medication. Side effects of many antipsychotics include:

* Drowsiness
* Dizziness when changing positions
* Blurred vision
* Rapid heartbeat
* Sensitivity to the sun
* Skin rashes
* Menstrual problems for women.

Atypical antipsychotic medications can cause major weight gain and changes in a person's metabolism. This may increase a person's risk of getting diabetes and high cholesterol.  A person's weight, glucose levels, and lipid levels should be monitored regularly by a doctor while taking an atypical antipsychotic medication.

Typical antipsychotic medications can cause side effects related to physical movement, such as:

* Rigidity
* Persistent muscle spasms
* Tremors
* Restlessness.

**How are antipsychotics taken and how do people respond to them?**

Antipsychotics are usually pills that people swallow, or liquid they can drink. Some antipsychotics are shots that are given once or twice a month.

Symptoms of schizophrenia, such as feeling agitated and having hallucinations, usually go away within days. Symptoms like delusions usually go away within a few weeks. After about six weeks, many people will see a lot of improvement.

However, people respond in different ways to antipsychotic medications, and no one can tell beforehand how a person will respond. Sometimes a person needs to try several medications before finding the right one. Doctors and patients can work together to find the best medication or medication combination, and dose.

Some people may have a relapse—their symptoms come back or get worse. Usually, relapses happen when people stop taking their medication, or when they only take it sometimes. Some people stop taking the medication because they feel better or they may feel they don't need it anymore. ***But no one should stop taking an antipsychotic medication without talking to his or her doctor.*** When a doctor says it is okay to stop taking a medication, it should be gradually tapered off, never stopped suddenly.

**Depression**

Depression is commonly treated with antidepressant medications. The most popular types of antidepressants are called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). These include:

* Fluoxetine (Prozac)
* Citalopram (Celexa)
* Sertraline (Zoloft)
* Paroxetine (Paxil)
* Escitalopram (Lexapro).

Other types of antidepressants include:

* venlafaxine (Effexor)
* duloxetine (Cymbalta)
* bupropion (Wellbutrin)

**What are the side effects?**

Antidepressants may cause mild side effects that usually do not last long. ***Any unusual reactions or side effects should be reported to a doctor immediately****.*

The most common side effects include:

* Headache, which usually goes away within a few days.
* Nausea, usually goes away within a few days.
* Sleeplessness or drowsiness, which may happen during the first few weeks but then goes away.
* Agitation (feeling jittery)
* Sexual problems, which can affect both men and women and may include reduced sex drive, and problems having and enjoying sex.

**How should antidepressants be taken?**

People taking antidepressants need to follow their doctors' directions. The medication should be taken in the right dose for the right amount of time. It can take three or four weeks until the medicine takes effect. Some people take the medications for a short time, and some people take them for much longer periods. People with long-term or severe depression may need to take medication for a long time.

***Once a person is taking antidepressants, it is important not to stop taking them without the help of a doctor.*** Sometimes people taking antidepressants feel better and stop taking the medication too soon, and the depression may return. When it is time to stop the medication, the doctor will help the person slowly and safely decrease the dose. It's important to give the body time to adjust to the change. People don't get addicted, or "hooked," on the medications, but stopping them abruptly can cause withdrawal symptoms.

If a medication does not work, it is helpful to be open to trying another one. A study funded by NIMH found that if a person with difficult-to-treat depression did not get better with a first medication, chances of getting better increased when the person tried a new one or added a second medication to his or her treatment.

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**Bipolar Disorder**

Bipolar disorder, also called manic-depressive illness, is commonly treated with mood stabilizers. Sometimes, antipsychotics and antidepressants are used along with a mood stabilizer.

**Mood stabilizers**

People with bipolar disorder usually try mood stabilizers first, such as:

* lithium
* valproic acid (Depakote)
* carbamazepine (Tegretol)
* lamotrigine (Lamictal)
* oxcarbazepine (Trileptal)

**Atypical antipsychotics**

Atypical antipsychotic medications are sometimes used to treat symptoms of bipolar disorder.

* Olanzapine (Zyprexa)
* Aripiprazole (Abilify)
* Risperidone (Risperdal)
* Ziprasidone (Geodon)
* Clozapine (Clorazil), which is often used for people who do not respond to lithium or anticonvulsants.

**Antidepressants**

Antidepressants are sometimes used to treat symptoms of depression in bipolar disorder. These include:

* fluoxetine (Prozac)
* paroxetine (Paxil)
* sertraline (Zoloft)

People with bipolar disorder should not take an antidepressant on its own. Doing so can cause the person to rapidly switch from depression to mania, which can be dangerous.  To prevent this problem, doctors give patients a mood stabilizer or an antipsychotic along with an antidepressant.

**What are the side effects?**

Lithium can cause several side effects, and some of them may become serious. They include:

* Loss of coordination
* Excessive thirst
* Frequent urination
* Blackouts
* Seizures
* Slurred speech
* Fast, slow, irregular, or pounding heartbeat
* Hallucinations (seeing things or hearing voices that do not exist)
* Changes in vision
* Itching, rash
* Swelling of the eyes, face, lips, tongue, throat, hands, feet, ankles, or lower legs.

If a person with bipolar disorder is being treated with lithium, he or she should visit the doctor regularly to check the levels of lithium in the blood, and make sure the kidneys and the thyroid are working normally.

Some possible side effects linked with valproic acid include:

* Changes in weight
* Nausea
* Stomach pain
* Vomiting
* Anorexia
* Loss of appetite.

**How should medications for bipolar disorder be taken?**

Medications should be taken as directed by a doctor. Sometimes a person's treatment plan needs to be changed. When changes in medicine are needed, the doctor will guide the change. ***A person should never stop taking a medication without asking a doctor for help****.*

There is no cure for bipolar disorder, but treatment works for many people. Treatment works best when it is continuous, rather than on and off. However, mood changes can happen even when there are no breaks in treatment. Patients should be open with their doctors about treatment. Talking about how treatment is working can help it be more effective.

It may be helpful for people or their family members to keep a daily chart of mood symptoms, treatments, sleep patterns, and life events. This chart can help patients and doctors track the illness. Doctors can use the chart to treat the illness most effectively.

Because medications for bipolar disorder can have serious side effects, it is important for anyone taking them to see the doctor regularly to check for possibly dangerous changes in the body.

**Anxiety Disorders**

Antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and beta-blockers are the most common medications used for anxiety disorders.

Anxiety disorders include:

* Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
* Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
* Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)
* Panic disorder
* Social phobia.

**Antidepressants**

Antidepressants were developed to treat depression, but they also help people with anxiety disorders. These include:

* fluoxetine (Prozac)
* sertraline (Zoloft)
* escitalopram (Lexapro)
* paroxetine (Paxil)
* citalopram (Celexa)
* venlafaxine (Effexor)
* bupropion (Wellbutrin)
* imipramine (Tofranil) is prescribed for panic disorder and GAD
* clomipramine (Anafranil) is used to treat OCD
* phenelzine (Nardil)
* tranylcypromine (Parnate)
* isocarboxazid (Marplan).

For more information, see the section on [medications used to treat depression**.**](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/mental-health-medications/what-medications-are-used-to-treat-depression-.shtml)

**Benzodiazepines (anti-anxiety medications)**

The anti-anxiety medications called benzodiazepines can start working more quickly than antidepressants. The ones used to treat anxiety disorders include:

* Clonazepam (Klonopin), which is used for social phobia and GAD
* Lorazepam (Ativan), which is used for panic disorder
* Alprazolam (Xanax), which is used for panic disorder and GAD
* Buspirone (Buspar) is an anti-anxiety medication used to treat GAD

**Beta-blockers**

Beta-blockers such as propranolol (Inderal), control some of the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as trembling and sweating.

**What are the side effects?**

See the [**section on antidepressants**](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/mental-health-medications/what-medications-are-used-to-treat-depression-.shtml) for a discussion on side effects. The most common side effects for benzodiazepines are drowsiness and dizziness. Other possible side effects include:

* Upset stomach
* Blurred vision
* Headache
* Confusion
* Grogginess
* Nightmares.

Common side effects from beta-blockers include:

* Fatigue
* Cold hands
* Dizziness
* Weakness.

**How should medications for anxiety disorders be taken?**

People can build a tolerance to benzodiazepines if they are taken over a long period of time and may need higher and higher doses to get the same effect. Some people may become dependent on them. To avoid these problems, doctors usually prescribe the medication for short periods, a practice that is especially helpful for people who have substance abuse problems or who become dependent on medication easily. If people suddenly stop taking benzodiazepines, they may get withdrawal symptoms, or their anxiety may return. Therefore, they should be tapered off slowly.

Buspirone and beta-blockers are similar. They are usually taken on a short-term basis for anxiety. Both should be tapered off slowly. Talk to the doctor before stopping any anti-anxiety medication.