

Medication can be just one part of a person's wellness plan to treat their mental illness. When considering medication, some people worry that it will change their personality or impact other parts of their lives. Medications can have significant side effects. But when prescribed appropriately by an experienced psychiatrist and taken as directed, medication may reduce or eliminate symptoms and help people take back their lives.

Medications used to treat mental health conditions fall into the following major categories:

Antipsychotics

Antipsychotics are used to treat symptoms of psychosis in conditions such as schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder by reducing or eliminating psychotic symptoms (delusions and hallucinations) or disorganized thinking by affecting a chemical in the brain called dopamine.

Antipsychotics are generally classified into two different categories: first-generation (typical antipsychotics) and second-generation (atypical antipsychotics). The second-generation antipsychotics were developed more recently, and are helpful in treating acute mania, bipolar disorder and treatment-resistant depression.

The first-generation antipsychotics are more likely to cause movement disorders like tardive dyskinesia—a condition characterized by random, uncontrollable muscle movements or tics. The second-generation antipsychotics are more likely to result in weight gain, which can lead to health complications such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants are used to improve symptoms of depression by affecting the brain chemicals associated with emotion, such as serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine. These medications are also used to help treat phobias, panic and anxiety disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD).

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are newer antidepressants. Potential side effects of SSRIs and SNRIs may include:

- Nausea
- Nervousness, agitation or restlessness
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Vomiting
- Reduced sexual desire/difficulty reaching orgasm/inability to maintain an erection
- Insomnia, drowsiness
- Weight gain or loss
- Headache
- Diarrhea

Tricyclics and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) are older types of antidepressants and may be prescribed if newer medications do not seem to be effective. Common side effects of tricyclics include:

- Increased appetite (often leads to weight gain)
- Drop in blood pressure when moving from sitting to standing, which can cause lightheadedness
- Dry mouth
- Blurred vision
- Constipation
- Urine retention
- Drowsiness
- Increased sweating

MAOIs are the least-prescribed of all antidepressants because they can cause dangerously high blood pressure when combined with certain foods or medications. People taking MAOIs must watch their diets carefully to avoid potentially life-threatening complications.

Anti-Anxiety Medications

Anti-anxiety medications are used to help reduce the emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety. One of the most commonly used are benzodiazepines which are helpful in the treatment of social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. Anti-anxiety medications work quickly and can be very effective in the short-term. However, people prone to substance abuse may become dependent on them.

Increasing the dosage over time may be necessary because the body can become used to these medications and require larger doses for the same therapeutic effect. People who stop taking benzodiazepines suddenly may experience unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. Other potential side effects may include:

- Low blood pressure
- Decreased sex drive
- Nausea
- Lack of coordination
- Depression
- Unusual emotional dysfunction, including anger and violence
- Memory loss
- Difficulty thinking

Mood Stabilizers

Mood stabilizers are used to treat mood swings associated with conditions such as bipolar disorder. Lithium, the oldest mood stabilizer, has been in use for over 50 years and can be very effective, particularly for bipolar disorder type I. However, regular blood tests are required when taking lithium because of potential serious side effects to the kidneys and thyroid.

Newer mood stabilizers may work better than lithium for some people. Mood stabilizers can prevent manic or hypomanic episodes and depressive episodes, but can also have side effects, which include:

- Excessive thirst
- Frequent urination
- Tremor (shakiness) of the hands
- Nausea and vomiting
- Slurred speech
- Fast, slow, irregular, or pounding heartbeat
- Blackouts
- Changes in vision
- Seizures
- Hallucinations
- Loss of coordination

Taking Psychiatric Medications

Medication can be just one part of a person's strategy for wellness and should always be taken in consultation with a psychiatrist and other healthcare providers. People respond to medications differently, despite having the same or similar diagnoses. As a result, it can take many different tries with different medications, a combination of medications and/or different dosages, to find out what works best for each person.

Only a few psychiatric medications work quickly, making a difference within a few hours or days. However, most take a longer period of time to take effect, taking several weeks or months before symptoms begin to improve. Providers typically start with a low dosage and slowly increase dosages to achieve a level that improves someone's symptoms.

Medications used to treat psychiatric conditions are available in a variety of forms. Many psychiatric medications are in pill form and are taken once or several times daily. Psychiatric medications are also available as liquids, injectables, patches or dissolved tablets. Those who have difficulty remembering to take their medication, have a history of stopping medication, or who have gaps of time where they cannot access their prescription, may choose a long-acting form of medication (often a shot) that lasts for several weeks.

When stopping a medication, it is important to work with the healthcare professional who is prescribing the medication – like a physician or nurse practitioner. There can be significant side effects to withdrawing and it is often recommended to taper off slowly to allow the body to adjust. Stopping medication suddenly can result in uncomfortable or serious side effects.

