

Getting the Best from Prescribed Medication

Navigators Guide



Prescribed medication is an important component of treatment, recovery and staying well. Family members play an important role - A supportive and informed approach makes a big difference to the effectiveness of treatment and a person's recovery. It is helpful if close family members understand how it works, what benefits to expect, recognise side effects, and how to support and encourage sensible use of prescribed medication. It may be as simple as prompting or helping someone remember to take it as prescribed, encouraging them to seek information about their medication or report unwanted side effects, to safe storage and use of the medication.

Medication & Relapse Prevention

The likelihood of relapse (becoming unwell) is closely associated with failure to take medication as prescribed. Other factors in preventing relapse associated with prescribed medication include: Prescription choice and individual effectiveness, dosage, interactions with other medication, and use of alcohol and non-prescribed drugs or substances. What works best for one person may not be the best option for another. There are numerous biological and metabolic reasons governing choice of prescription such as: Contra-indications and drug sensitivity, weight, height, health status (pathology results), nutrition, exercise, age, gender, safety, and most important - indications eg What condition or symptoms are being treated. Five broad classes of medication commonly used in mental health are also summarised in this fact sheet.

General Guidelines Around Medication Use

When prescribed medication by a general practitioner or psychiatrist, seek information and ask questions so you and your family member are well informed and clear about the treatment. It is important to advise of any known allergies, drug reactions and illnesses – past or present, and any other prescribed medications being taken. It is also important to advise use of any street drugs or alcohol. If a person is breastfeeding, pregnant or planning to be pregnant, operates heavy machinery or drives, let the doctor know. Your family member will be asked questions to determine which medication is most suitable for them.

What Family Members Need to Know

It is most important that the person receiving prescribed medication understands the reason for its use and advice and precautions around taking it. Laws exist to protect patients and their rights to privacy and confidentiality. Providing they have no objection and consent to family members knowing, in most situations it is helpful and beneficial for close family members to be informed as well. Being well informed improves safe and effective use of prescribed medication. Key questions to ask are:

- ❖ Name of medication, correct dose, how frequently it needs to be taken and for how long.
- ❖ What the medication is for, how it works, benefits and how long before you can expect some improvement.

- ❖ Whether it needs to be taken before, with or after food, and any food, drinks or other medicines to be avoided.
- ❖ Possible side effects, which may or may not occur and what to do if present.
- ❖ Any precautions on how to store the medication eg whether it needs to be kept in a fridge, safe storage out of reach of children.
- ❖ Where to get more information about medication and treatment, apart from information supplied on or with the prescription.

Common Tips and Precautions

- ❖ Always take medications as prescribed and directed.
- ❖ Always report any unusual feelings and unwanted side effects.
- ❖ Most psychiatric medications take a minimum of several weeks before a beneficial effect is experienced. This is because it takes a while for the blood-serum levels of the medication to build up in the body. Don't stop taking the medication just because nothing happens straight away.
- ❖ Do not take any other medications, prescribed or non-prescribed without checking first with the treating doctor. Some medications interact with others: Reducing their effectiveness, increasing unwanted side effects, and in some cases may be potentially harmful, dangerous and in rare situations can be lethal.
- ❖ Do not smoke dope or use illicit drugs whilst on prescribed medication. All alcohol and drugs interact with prescribed medication in the body, may prevent it from working, cause or increase unwanted side effects, and are often dangerous, increasing risk of

overdose, toxic poisoning and may be lethal. Alcohol must not be taken with some medications. Always check with the treating doctor, mental health nurse or health care professional for information and advice.

- ❖ Try to maintain a regular, balanced healthy diet, fluid intake and physical exercise each day. Good nutrition and exercise will help you stay well. Lack of exercise, poor nutrition, fast foods, irregular meals, digestive upsets and rapid changes in body weight, not only cause discomfort, but increase risk of physical illness and alter the effects on the body of prescribed medication.

Why people stop taking medication

There are many reasons why people stop taking their medication. There may be a good reason, however it may also be due to poor information and understanding and there are a few myths. Even when there is good reason it is still best to consult with a doctor, mental health nurse or health care professional as soon as possible, as there are things that can be done or adjustments made to suit individual needs. Remember that failing to take or ceasing medication is a very common cause of relapse. Relapse usually means return of symptoms and illness, loss of occupational and social functioning, relationship problems inability to cope with every day life, and re-hospitalisation. In most situations it is preventable.

FAQs - Common Myths

I feel better - Symptoms of illness have gone – I don't need to take it anymore.

Most psychiatric medications need to be continued. They do not cure the illness, symptoms will usually return sometime after ceasing the medication.

Unlike antibiotics which combat infection, allowing the body to remove the cause, psychiatric medication restores and maintains the balance of natural elements called neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, required for healthy brain functioning. As soon as medication is ceased, whatever was causing the imbalance usually returns triggering relapse and symptoms of illness.

Not everyone needs to continue taking medication.

This is in fact true, however it is not possible yet to identify who can manage without medication. Research indicates more people are at risk of relapse on ceasing medication. This may be evident from past experience.

Medication is addictive and/or can be harmful.

Very few prescribed medications are addictive or cause dependence. Antipsychotics, mood stabilisers and antidepressants are not addictive. Anxiolytics such as benzodiazepines can cause dependence but less likely when managed sensibly in accordance with prescribed advice from a doctor. Some prescribed medication can be harmful, but only when prescribed instructions are not followed and/or taken in high doses such as overdose. Remember all prescribed medications are potentially harmful if taken incorrectly or inappropriately, which is why they are legally regulated by prescription. Responsible use is an important aspect of safety and effectiveness.

Prescribed medication is ineffective and no better than a placebo.

Whilst some research recently has indicated no significant difference from a placebo, (you may have noted recent reports in the media around antidepressants), this is not the case for

most. Some of these studies and the research methods need careful examination. For instance, people who do not have clearly defined depression have been included in some studies – Why would there be any improvement in mood if there is no clinical depression to treat. Studies indicate that people with more clinical symptoms and especially more severe disabling symptoms do benefit. Why would you expect to feel better on medication prescribed for a condition you may not have? Results of studies from one type of medication cannot be applied to another type. If you have concerns, consult your doctor, but you should continue with your medication, if you want to stay well.

All I need is a pill to fix my problem – Medication is the answer.

It is not helpful to expect medication to fix everything. When prescribed in the correct dose for the right condition, you can expect unwanted symptoms to diminish. It will help in recovery and in staying well. However, people with mental illness, their families and research clearly indicate that recovery is more complex than simply taking medication. Best results are gained with prescribed medication in conjunction with other treatments and interventions, also known to make a difference. Medication is not going to solve loneliness, but support networks, social skills training, seeking new friends and maintaining healthy relationships will make a difference. Medication won't solve financial, housing or relationship problems or the negative feelings associated with them. These call for psychological and social interventions. Negative feelings are part of normal everyday living and of course we want to experience less negative and more positive feelings. But popping a pill is not the solution for this, learning to challenge our negative thoughts, developing our

personal skills and new coping strategies will help us find a path through this. Remember, medication is there to help reduce the clinical symptoms of illness, enable people to cope better, improve receptivity to other supportive/therapeutic interventions, and ease distress and discomfort, not simply to make us feel good.

Other reasons why people stop taking medication

- ❖ Side effects associated with different types of medication
- ❖ Weight gain associated with some medications and/or wanting to lose weight
- ❖ Wanting to have a night out or have a glass of wine or beer
- ❖ Feeling of sedation, tired or lacking energy
- ❖ Forgetting to take medication
- ❖ Medication not being as effective as expected
- ❖ Not committed to taking medication or feeling embarrassed about having to take it
- ❖ Change in libido and sex
- ❖ Emotional and spiritual beliefs and experiences

All these are quite reasonable, but it does not mean you should stop taking the medication. There are better ways to cope with this such as:

- ❖ Getting the dosage and frequency right
- ❖ Monitoring blood serum levels
- ❖ Actions to minimise side effects and reporting side effects to the doctor or mental health nurse
- ❖ Switching to another medication
- ❖ Time of day it is taken
- ❖ Reducing nicotine intake (smoking often reduces the benefits of medication)
- ❖ Improving sleep, diet and exercise
- ❖ Talking about any concerns

In all these cases, it is better to consult your doctor, mental health nurse or allied health professional for more information, printed matter/handouts, and help to manage this, without putting someone's recovery at risk.

Types Of Medications

Antipsychotics

Used to treat psychosis, schizophrenia and specific symptoms such as delusions, hallucinations, thought disorders, poor concentration, severe agitation, disorganised or bizarre behaviour, and manic symptoms associated with bipolar disorder. They work by blocking specific neurotransmitters such as dopamine in the brain, restoring normal functioning eg perception, cognition (rational thought processes) and behaviour necessary for daily living. Psychosis is directly associated with excessive production or activity of these naturally occurring elements. The new generation Atypicals are the most common group used today in treating both first episode and ongoing psychoses. The older conventional antipsychotics are used less frequently, not because they are any less effective, but because they may cause significantly more unwanted side effects such as: Drowsiness, sedation, extrapyramidal side effects, muscular tension, tardive dyskinesia, involuntary muscle movements, dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, dizziness, changes in heart rate, weight gain, and neuro-malignant syndrome (rare but serious and potentially fatal). Side effects are not experienced by all, can range from minor to severe and are closely associated with the particular type of medication prescribed. Some medications such as clozapine, for instance require regular blood tests to guard against rare but serious conditions such as agranulocytosis, cardiomyopathy and seizures.

Antidepressants

Used to treat major depression and associated clinical symptoms such as pervasive feelings of sadness, hopelessness, poor appetite, insomnia, lack of energy, poor concentration, and severely diminished interest in pleasurable activities. They work by increasing the activity of specific neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine in the brain, restoring normal functioning. Major depression is directly associated with reduced production or activity of these naturally occurring elements. The more commonly used SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) reduce the reuptake of serotonin, allowing this neurotransmitter to be more readily available, restoring normal mood and cognitive functioning. Other types include Tricyclic and MAOIs (Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors) which require a special (restricted) MAOI diet. Some side effects which may be experienced include: Gastrointestinal disturbance, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea (more likely in earlier stages of treatment), weight loss, insomnia, sedation (in younger people), disturbed dreams, headaches, palpitations, rash, sweating, anxiety, restlessness, sexual dysfunction, susceptibility to bruising, hypomania and withdrawal reaction on sudden cessation of treatment.

Mood Stabilisers

Used to treat bipolar and unipolar disorders, especially associated with serious or marked mood swings such as mania and depression, and to improve effectiveness of antidepressants or antipsychotics, where this may be indicated or poor response to treatment. Two major group types: Lithium Carbonate (a natural mineral with similar properties and absorption in the body to sodium chloride (salt); and specific

Anticonvulsants such as Carbamazepine and Sodium Valproate. Whilst they are particularly effective in stabilising mood, their precise effect is complex and not fully understood. Side effects may include: Indigestion, nausea, diarrhoea, drowsiness, dizziness, unsteady gait, muscle tremor, rash, dyscrasias (rare blood changes). Regular blood tests are recommended to monitor serum levels. Lithium toxicity can be serious or lethal. Risk is increased during hot weather - Heat exposure, excessive sweating, nausea, diarrhoea and dehydration should be reported to a doctor immediately. Carbamazepine can cause rare but serious suppression of bone marrow - Unexplained fever, sore throat, easy bruising or bleeding should be reported to a doctor immediately.

Anxiolytics

Used to treat anxiety disorders, panic disorders, agoraphobia, phobic and obsessive compulsive disorders, and post traumatic stress disorder, including symptoms of severe anxiety, tension, agitation, feelings of nervousness, and treatment of alcohol withdrawal. They work by countering the sympathetic response of the body (fight/flight) and effects of adrenaline (natural body hormone), causing muscle relaxation and mild sedation. The most common group used today are the Benzodiazepines, which can cause dependence and withdrawal symptoms on cessation (particularly if used in high doses or for extended period of time). Possible side effects include: Drowsiness, dizziness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty in coordinating movements, dependence with long term use, seizures, and in rare cases susceptibility to paradoxical reactions such as acute rage, excitement or over-stimulation. Usually prescribed on a short term basis and may be gradually reduced

before cessation of treatment. Do not increase dose, frequency or suddenly stop taking them without discussion with the doctor or mental health nurse.

Anticholinergics

Also known as Anti-Parkinsonian agents, these are primarily used to treat the extrapyramidal side effects associated with antipsychotic medication (particularly older conventional Antipsychotics) and some Antidepressants, including symptoms of restlessness, muscle tension, cramps, involuntary movements, dry mouth. May be prescribed as a precaution with an Antipsychotic, but usually only when side effects are experienced, observed or reported. Anticholinergics also have the following possible side effects: Dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, drowsiness, difficulty passing urine, exacerbation of narrow angular glaucoma.

Resources

www.mentalhealth.com

Click on the *Medication* icon for information on most common psychiatric drugs. You can translate information from English to Spanish, French, German, Italian and Portuguese. See "Internet links" for more sites on Medication.

<http://mentalhelp.net>

American-based site with information on medications listed in alphabetical order.

www.schizophrenia.com

Start with the basic *Schizophrenia Information* icon and go to the *Medication* icon.

www.mentalhealth.asn.au

Mental Health Association NSW Inc
- A wide range of written material including a comprehensive series of

fact sheets on mental illness. You can also call the **Mental Health Information Service**: P 1800 674 200 or (02) 9816 5688

www.sane.org

SANE - Has fact sheets on mental illnesses and issues for carers.

www.eppic.org.au

EPPIC - (Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre) publish a useful information sheet on medication for people who have recently experienced their first episode of mental illness.

Books

The SANE Guide to Treatment: A guide to treatments for people seriously affected by mental illness. (1998) Published by SANE Australia - This book includes information on medication and is available by ringing SANE Australia on (03) 9682 5933.

Other Information

Pharmaceutical Companies provide information on their products. You can ask for a copy of a pamphlet on a specific medication from your family member's doctor or a health care professional. It should be noted that Pharmaceutical Companies are prohibited in Australia from promoting prescribed products to members of the public.