

# ANTIPSYCHOTICS

## *An - tea - sigh - cot - icks*

### **Why have I been prescribed an antipsychotic?**

Antipsychotics are medicines used to help treat schizophrenia and similar conditions, such as psychosis.

When they have schizophrenia, many people hear voices talking to them or about them. They may also become suspicious or paranoid. Some people also have problems with their thinking and feel that other people can read their thoughts. These are called "positive symptoms". Antipsychotics can help to relieve these symptoms. Many people with schizophrenia also experience "negative symptoms". They feel tired and lacking in energy and may become quite inactive and withdrawn. Antipsychotics may help relieve these symptoms as well. Antipsychotics are also useful to help manage agitation, anxiety, mania or hypomania, nausea, sleep problems and many other conditions.

### **What exactly are antipsychotics?**

Schizophrenia and similar disorders are sometimes referred to as psychoses, hence the name given to this group of medicines, which is the "antipsychotics". They are sometimes also called the neuroleptics or (incorrectly) major tranquillisers. Some examples of antipsychotics include chlorpromazine ('*Largactil*'), haloperidol ('*Serenace*', '*Haldol*'), levomepromazine or methotrimeprazine ('*Nozinan*'), loxapine ('*Loxapac*') pericyazine ('*Neulactil*'), pimozide ('*Orap*'), promazine, thioridazine ('*Melleril*') and trifluoperazine ('*Stelazine*'). There are some others.

These older ones are some times referred to as "typical" antipsychotics whilst the newer ones (such as olanzapine and clozapine) are referred to as "atypicals". Some typical antipsychotics can be given as "depot" injections. This is so that you don't need to remember to take tablets every day. Some examples are fluphenazine ('*Modecate*'), flupenthixol ('*Depixol*'), zuclopenthixol ('*Clopixol*') and haloperidol ('*Haldol Decanoate*').

### **Are the antipsychotics safe to take?**

It is usually safe to have antipsychotics regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but they don't suit everyone. Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- a) if you have epilepsy, diabetes, depression, myasthenia gravis, phaeochromocytoma, Parkinson's disease or glaucoma, or suffer from heart, liver, breathing, kidney, or prostate trouble;
- b) if you are taking any other medication. This includes medicine from your pharmacist, such as antihistamines;
- c) if you are pregnant, breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant.

### **How should I take my antipsychotic?**

Look at the label on your medicine; it should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. If you have any questions, speak to your doctor or pharmacist. Most medicines are now supplied with an information leaflet.

### **What should I do if I miss a dose?**

Never change your dose without checking with your doctor. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within a few hours of the usual time.

### **When I feel better, can I stop taking them?**

No. If you stop taking antipsychotics, your original symptoms may return, but this may not be for 3 to 6 months after you stop the drug. You and your doctor should decide together when you can come off them. Most people need to be on an antipsychotic for quite a long time, sometimes years. This is not thought to be harmful. Antipsychotics are not addictive.

### **What will happen to me when I start taking my antipsychotic?**

Antipsychotics do not work straight away. For example, it may take several days or even weeks for some of the symptoms to reduce. To begin with, most people find that this medication will help them feel more relaxed and calm. Later, after one or two weeks, other symptoms should begin to improve.

Unfortunately, you might get some side effects before you start to feel any better. Most side effects should go away after a few weeks. Some antipsychotics suit some people better than others. Look at the table over the page. It tells you what to do if you get any side effects. Not all the antipsychotics have the side effects in the table. There are many other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

Side effect	What is it?	What should I do if it happens to me?
<b>COMMON</b>		
AKATHISIA	You feel restless, unable to feel comfortable unless you are moving.	Tell your doctor about this. It may be possible to change your drug or dose, or give you something to reduce these feelings.
ANTI-CHOLINERGIC EFFECTS	Dry mouth, not much saliva or spit.	Sugar-free boiled sweets, chewing gum or eating citrus fruits usually helps. If not, your doctor can give you a mouth spray. A change in medicine or dose may be possible.
	Blurred vision	Things look fuzzy and you can't focus properly. See your doctor if you are worried. You won't need glasses.
	Feeling "bunged up" inside. You can't pass a motion or stool.	Eat more fibre e.g. bran, fruit and vegetables. Do more walking. Make sure you drink plenty of fluid. A mild laxative might help.
	Difficulty in passing urine	Contact your doctor now.
DROWSINESS	Feeling sleepy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your antipsychotic at a different time.
MOVEMENT DISORDERS	Feeling shaky or having a tremor. Your neck may twist back. Your eyes and tongue may move on their own.	It is not usually dangerous. If it is bad or worries you, tell your doctor. He or she can give you something for it.
RAISED PROLACTIN	Prolactin is a natural chemical we all have. High levels can affect periods in women or cause impotence in men. It may also cause breast tenderness and milk secretion, in men as well as women.	This sometimes wears off in a few weeks, but discuss this with your doctor anyway. It may be that a change in dose or different drug will help.
WEIGHT GAIN	Eating more and putting on weight.	Avoid fatty foods like chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks. A diet full of vegetables and fibre will usually help, as will physical activities such as walking. If it becomes a problem, ask to see a dietician.
<b>UNCOMMON</b>		
HYPOTENSION	A low blood pressure. You may feel faint when you stand up.	Try not to stand up too quickly. If you feel dizzy, don't drive. This dizziness is not dangerous
PALPITATIONS	A fast heart beat.	It is not usually dangerous but mention it to your doctor.
SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION	Finding it hard to have an orgasm. No desire for sex. Men can become impotent.	Discuss this with your doctor when you next meet.
<b>RARE</b>		
PHOTO-SENSITIVITY	Going blotchy in the sun.	Can be common with chlorpromazine in particular. Avoid direct sunlight or sun-lamps. Use a high factor sun block cream.
SKIN RASHES	Blotches seen anywhere.	Stop taking the antipsychotic - see your doctor now.
<b>VERY RARE</b>		
NMS	Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome includes a high body temperature, muscle stiffness and being unable to move.	It usually occurs within a few weeks of a dose change. Contact your doctor immediately. Keep cool, with fans or cool water.
AGRANULOCYTOSIS	Low numbers of white cells in the blood. You may get more infections.	Always tell your doctor if you have a sore throat, fever, or just feel ill. You may need a blood test.

### What about alcohol?

It is officially recommended that people taking antipsychotics should not drink alcohol. This is because both antipsychotics and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken at the same time, severe drowsiness can result. This can lead to falls or accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol often makes schizophrenia or psychosis worse. Excessive drinking is especially likely to do this. Once people are used to taking medication, they can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm. **Avoid alcohol** altogether for the first one or two months. After this, if you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If this doesn't make you feel drowsy, then it is probably OK to drink small amounts. It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

Don't stop taking your medication because you fancy a drink. Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Never drink any alcohol and drive.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may also find other books or leaflets useful. If you have access to the internet you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful, as internet based information is not always accurate.



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