

MEDICATION & TREATMENT: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This guide offers a simple overview of how antipsychotic medications work and what to expect when starting or adjusting them.

The IAM Medication Resource Centre provides clear, accessible information about medications commonly used in mental-health care, especially antipsychotic medications used to support people living with psychosis and related conditions. This fact sheet offers a gentle, plain-language overview to help you understand what these medications are, how they work, and what to expect.

What Are Antipsychotic Medications?

Antipsychotic medications help reduce symptoms such as:

Hallucinations

Unusual beliefs

Disorganized or racing thoughts

Confusion or agitation

They can also be used to support conditions like depression, bipolar disorder, or severe anxiety, depending on a person's needs. Antipsychotics do not cure mental illnesses, but they can help manage symptoms so people can feel safer, think more clearly, and participate more comfortably in daily life.

How Do These Medications Work?

Antipsychotics help rebalance chemicals in the brain that affect thinking, perception, mood, and behaviour. **They influence neurotransmitters such as:**

Dopamine

Serotonin

Norepinephrine

Different medications work in different ways, and each person responds differently. What works well for one person may not work for another. It may take time to find the right medication and dose.

Different Types of Antipsychotic Medications

There are two main categories:

1. First-generation (“typical”) antipsychotics

These older medications have been used for many decades. They can be very effective for some people but may cause more movement-related side effects.

2. Second-generation (“atypical”) antipsychotics

These medications tend to have a different side-effect profile and may cause fewer movement-related effects for some people. They are commonly prescribed today.

There is no “best” medication. There is only what works best for each person.

How Medications Are Taken

Antipsychotics can come in:

Tablets or capsules

Liquids

Dissolvable tablets

Short-acting injections

Long-acting injections (given every few weeks)

You and your prescriber will work together to choose the format that best fits your life, preferences, and needs.

Finding the Right Medication

It’s common to:

Try more than one medication

Need dose changes

Combine medication with therapy, routines, and other supports

Recovery is not one-size-fits-all. It can take time to find the right fit- this is normal and does not mean treatment is failing. **Medications are just one part of a broader treatment plan that may also include:**

Therapy

Peer support

Wellness routines

Community programs

Cultural or spiritual practices

Family support

What to Expect When Starting or Changing Medication

You may notice:

Gradual symptom improvement

Changes in sleep or energy

Mild side effects that may pass on their own

Side effects that need monitoring

It helps to:

Track changes in how you feel

Write down questions for appointments

Use the IAM Medication Activities Tracker

Talk openly with your prescriber about concerns

Involve a caregiver/support person if helpful

If Side Effects Happen

Many side effects are manageable and improve over time.

Let your doctor or pharmacist know if you notice:

Changes in movement

Shifts in appetite or sleep

Restlessness or discomfort

Emotional changes

Never stop medication suddenly without guidance; sudden changes can cause symptoms to return.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor or Pharmacist

Why this medication? What symptoms will it help?

When should I expect to notice changes?

What side effects should I watch for?

What should I do if I miss a dose?

How will we monitor this medication?

Are there other options if this one doesn't work for me?

(See IAM's full "Questions for Your Doctor" and "Questions for Your Pharmacist" resources.)

Where to Learn More

The IAM Medication Resource Centre provides:

General information on antipsychotic medications

Detailed information on specific medications

Tools to support decision-making

Guidance for both individuals and caregivers

Visit www.iamentalhealth.ca for the complete library.

If you need help or have medication concerns

Get Help Now

1-855-449-9949

support@iamentalhealth.ca