

MEDICATION & SIDE EFFECTS

Understanding side effects can help you feel more prepared and confident as you navigate treatment.

Medications can play an important role in supporting mental health, whether someone is experiencing psychosis, depression, anxiety, or related symptoms. They can help reduce distressing experiences, stabilize mood, and improve day-to-day functioning.

Side effects can happen with any medication. **Not everyone will experience them, and many side effects are manageable.** This guide offers a simple, clear overview of the most common side effects described in your original reference materials.

Below is an overview of common side effects described in our medication materials.

Antipsychotic Medications

Antipsychotic medications can help reduce symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, or disorganized thinking. They are believed to work in part by affecting dopamine activity in the brain.

Movement effects: tremors, stiffness, or tics. Higher doses may increase the chance of these symptoms. Second-generation medications may have lower risk than older ones. Medications such as benztropine can sometimes help.

Dizziness: often when standing up suddenly.

Weight gain: may occur due to increased appetite or sedation. This can also affect other health areas like diabetes or heart health.

Agitation or sedation: some may feel “wired,” restless, or unable to stop moving; others may feel tired or experience both.

Tardive dyskinesia (TD): a rare condition involving involuntary movements. More common with older medications but possible with newer ones. TD can worsen when stopping medication abruptly.

Neuroleptic malignant syndrome (NMS): rare and serious. Signs include fever, muscle stiffness, and confusion, seek immediate medical help.

Side effects vary from person to person and depend on the medication used.

Antidepressant Medications

Antidepressants can support symptoms of depression and anxiety, and may also help with conditions such as chronic pain or bulimia. They often work best alongside therapy, social support, and regular self-care.

SSRIs (e.g., fluoxetine, paroxetine, citalopram, escitalopram, sertraline)

Common side effects:

Nausea, diarrhea

Headaches, dry mouth

Changes in sleep (difficulty falling asleep, vivid dreams)

Weight changes

Anxiety or restlessness

Sexual-side-effect changes

SNRIs (e.g., venlafaxine, duloxetine, desvenlafaxine)

Common side effects:

Nausea or dizziness

Nervousness or anxiety

Fatigue or drowsiness

Loss of appetite

Sexual side effects

Higher doses may affect blood pressure.

NDRIs (e.g., bupropion)

possible side effects: jitteriness or trouble sleeping.

NaSSAs (e.g., mirtazapine)

Common side effects: drowsiness, weight gain.

Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) (e.g., amitriptyline, imipramine, desipramine)

Possible side effects:

Dry mouth

Constipation

Sedation

Dizziness

Blurred vision

These medications may affect heart rhythm; monitoring is sometimes needed.

MAOIs (e.g., phenelzine, tranylcypromine)

Effective but require a special diet to avoid interactions.

Anti-Anxiety Medications (Benzodiazepines)

Benzodiazepines may help reduce intense anxiety or panic and can support sleep.

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Common Side Effects:

Drowsiness

Sedation

Dizziness

Loss of balance

Higher-dose Side Effects:

Confusion

Disorientation

Memory problems

Breathing difficulties

Depression

These medications are typically used short-term due to dependence risks.

If you notice any new or worsening side effects, check in with your doctor or pharmacist. You don't need to navigate concerns alone.

Tips for Individuals & Families

Everyone responds differently to medications. What one person experiences, someone else may not.

Keep notes about any changes, especially when starting or adjusting medication.

If a side effect feels worrying or disruptive, reach out to your doctor, nurse practitioner, or pharmacist.

Never stop a medication suddenly without medical guidance.

Caregivers can help by offering support, noticing changes, and helping prepare questions for appointments.

Support for Caregivers

How You Can Support Your Family Member:

Gently ask how your family member is feeling physically and emotionally.

Help track side effects using IAM's Medication Activities Tracker found in Your Toolkit

Attend appointments if invited, and help ask questions about side effects or alternatives.

Offer practical support: bringing water, snacks, rest breaks, or helping with routines.

Validate their experience rather than minimizing it:

“I hear you – that sounds uncomfortable.”

“Let's bring this up at your next appointment.”

What Caregivers Should Watch For:

Sudden restlessness or agitation

Extreme tiredness

Dizziness or unsteadiness

Involuntary movements

Confusion or fever (seek urgent help)

Caregiver well-being matters too:

Take breaks, reach out for support, and notice your own feelings. Supporting someone on medication is easier when you also feel cared for.

Where to Learn More

Visit the IAM Medication Resource Centre for complete information on antipsychotic medications and specific drug profiles.

If you need support

Get Help Now

1-855-449-9949 / support@iamentalhealth.ca

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[1-855-449-9949](tel:18554499949) / support@iamentalhealth.ca