

Antipsychotic Drugs



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In case of any discrepancy or inconsistency, the English version shall prevail.

What are Antipsychotics?

Antipsychotics are a group of medicines that are used to treat certain types of mental illnesses whose symptoms include psychotic experiences, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and personality disorder. Psychotic symptoms are associated with changes of certain chemicals in the brain, including dopamine, serotonin, noradrenaline and acetylcholine. Antipsychotic drugs suppress psychotic symptoms by altering the effect of these chemicals.

There are two main types of Antipsychotics:

➤ First generation antipsychotics (FGAs)

These medicines are sometimes called the conventional antipsychotics. The first antipsychotic drug is chlorpromazine which was developed in the 1950s, and several similar drugs were developed over the years. Many of these continue to be used nowadays.

➤ Second generation antipsychotics (SGAs)

These medicines are often known as the atypical antipsychotics, and they may cause different side effects from FGAs.

What are the common side effects of Antipsychotics?

Side effects	
Anticholinergic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Dry mouth▪ Blurry vision▪ Constipation▪ Sedation
Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tremor▪ Slowed movements▪ Restlessness▪ Muscle stiffness and rigidity▪ Sudden muscle cramps▪ Involuntary movements
Sexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Reduced libido▪ Sexual dysfunction▪ Interference with menstrual cycle▪ Swollen breast tissue▪ Breast milk production
Metabolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Increased appetite▪ Weight gain▪ Elevated blood sugar, cholesterol, blood pressure

Generally, anticholinergic, movement and sexual side effects are more often seen in patients taking FGAs; whereas SGAs more commonly induce metabolic side effects. Additional treatments, adjustment of antipsychotics treatments and advice on lifestyle changes may be offered to patients who experience these side effects.

What is Clozapine?

Clozapine is a SGA and is usually used to treat patients who did not have adequate response to two or more antipsychotics or who did not tolerate other antipsychotics due to side effects. In comparison to other antipsychotics (both FGAs and SGAs), clozapine is found significantly more effective in reducing psychotic symptoms, and is less associated with muscle side effects. However, it may cause rare but serious and life-threatening side effects, including severe neutropenia, low blood pressure when changing positions, seizures, and inflammation of the heart. Therefore, close monitoring, frequent blood tests and doctor appointments are required, in order to ensure safety, in patients taking clozapine. Besides, sudden changes in smoking habits or caffeine drinking habits may affect the effects of clozapine.

What are the routes of administration of Antipsychotics?

There are different routes of administration of antipsychotics available in Hong Kong, and these can be used in different circumstances. There are oral preparations and injectable preparations.

Oral preparations include tablets, capsules and oral dispersible tablets. These are usually taken on a daily basis as maintenance treatment or on an as-needed basis.

Injectable preparations can be classified as short-acting injection and long-acting injection, (also called depot). Short-acting injections can be injected into blood vessels or muscles and are usually used to manage psychotic episodes or acute agitation. Depots are injected into muscles and usually used as an antipsychotic maintenance treatment to ensure patient's compliance. Depots are usually given every four weeks, depending on the drug.

What tests do I need before I start an Antipsychotic?

Before initiating an antipsychotic, your doctor should do different tests to assess your health to find out if an antipsychotic is suitable for you.

- Past medical history and lifestyle taking
- Physical examinations
- Blood tests
- Electrocardiogram (ECG)

How long will I need to take Antipsychotic medications?

The duration of treatment depends on the progress of your mental illness. Treatment usually continues after recovery from an acute first psychotic episode in order to prevent relapses, or to reduce the number and severity of relapses. Depending on the course and individual features, some psychiatrists may suggest to stop antipsychotics 1-2 years after recovery, some may suggest to continue beyond this interval.

How should I come off my Antipsychotics?

Patients should only come off their antipsychotics slowly and safely under guidance and monitoring from their psychiatrist. It is possible that psychotic symptoms return while weaning off antipsychotics, and patients may experience a range of withdrawal symptoms within the first few days after the significant reduction use or discontinuation of antipsychotics. The common withdrawal symptoms include:

- Restlessness, agitation and irritability
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Mood disturbances and anxiety
- Aching muscles
- Headache
- Shaking and sweating

What should the caregiver do if patient refuses to take their Antipsychotics?

If a patient refuses to take their medicine, it's important for caregivers to approach the situation with patience and understanding. Open communication is key. Discuss the importance of the medication, the benefits it provides, and the potential risks of not taking it. If the patient continues to refuse, it may be helpful to involve the doctor or a mental health professional in the conversation. They can provide further information and reassurance, or suggest alternative treatments if necessary. It's crucial to respect the patient's autonomy and feelings while also ensuring their health and safety.

DO

1. Strictly follow the doctor's instructions.
2. Pay attention to the drug name, dosage and frequency, etc. before taking your medication.
3. Read the prescription label carefully.
4. Pay attention to the dosage, indication, contraindication and side effects.
5. Understand the method of administration.
6. Store your medication properly.
7. Complete the prescribed course unless otherwise directed.
8. If you have any questions, talk to your family and ask your health care professionals.

DON'T

1. Change the dosage of your medication on your own.
2. Stop taking your medication except on your doctor's advice.
3. Drink alcohol with your medication.
4. Put your medication in other bottle.
5. Take other medication unless directed by your doctor.
6. Lie to your doctors about your compliance.