

making sense



psychiatric medication

Making sense of psychiatric medication

This booklet is for anyone who wants to know more about psychiatric medication. It explains what psychiatric drugs are, what to know before taking them, and information on side effects and coming off medication.

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What is psychiatric medication?

Psychiatric medication includes all drugs which can be prescribed to treat different types of mental health problems, or to reduce the symptoms.

What types of psychiatric medication are there?

There are four main types of psychiatric medication:

Type of psychiatric medication	What it's prescribed for
antidepressants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• depression• some forms of anxiety• some eating disorders
antipsychotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• psychosis• schizophrenia• schizoaffective disorder• hypomania and mania• bipolar disorder• sometimes severe anxiety
mood stabilisers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• bipolar disorder• hypomania and mania• sometimes recurrent severe depression
sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• severe insomnia (inability to sleep)• severe anxiety

In addition to looking at Mind's online resources for each type of medication, you can also find reliable information on the eMC (electronic Medicines Compendium – medicines.org.uk/emc) and NHS Choices (nhs.uk) websites.

Why might I take medication?

Generally, psychiatric drugs can't cure a mental health problem. But in some cases, they can help reduce the symptoms or help you cope with them better.

Whether you are offered medication or not depends on:

- your diagnosis
- your symptoms
- how severely the condition affects you.

There are many other types of treatment options as well as medication. Many people use a combination of medication and other treatments, such as a talking treatment, to manage their condition.

How long might I take medication for?

Again, this depends on:

- your diagnosis
- how severely the condition affects you.

For some conditions (such as depression, or an episode of psychosis) you might only be expected take the medication for a specific period of time.

If you have repeated episodes of mental ill health (such as might happen with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia), your doctor might advise you to stay on your medication for several years, or indefinitely.

Who can prescribe medication?

You can be prescribed psychiatric medication by:

- a GP
- a psychiatrist
- a nurse prescriber – usually attached to your surgery or community mental health team (CMHT).

Why are some drugs called by several different names?

Each individual drug can have two kinds of names:

- A generic name – this is the drug's medical name.
- A trade name – this is a name that may be given by the company that makes the drug.

A drug only has one generic name – but it might also have several different trade names if more than one company makes it.

It's useful to know both the generic name and the trade names for a drug, because people might talk about the same drug using different names.

For example, the antidepressant fluoxetine (generic name) can also be referred to by the trade names Olena, Oxactin, Prozac and Prozep.

What do I need to know before I take medication?

Before deciding to take any drug, it's important to make sure you have all the facts you need to make an informed choice. As a starting point, you should feel confident that you can answer 'yes' to all of the following statements.

I understand:

- what the drug is
- why I've been offered it
- what alternative treatments are available, such as talking treatments or local support groups
- what the possible benefits and risks are, including if there is a risk I could become dependent on it
- what the possible side effects are

- how, when and how much I should take
- how long my doctor expects me to take it for
- how to store it safely (for example, in the fridge)
- how to stop taking it safely
- what different names the drug might be called.

I have:

- checked the ingredients list and I know that there's nothing in the drug that I'm intolerant to, or don't want to take (such as lactose or gelatin)
- read the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) that comes in the drug packet, and understand what it says; if you are in hospital, or you are not given a PIL with your medication, you can ask your doctor or pharmacist for a copy.

I've told my doctor:

- if I'm taking any other medication, including non-prescription medicines
- if I have any other health problems
- if I am pregnant or breastfeeding a child
- about any previous experiences I have of taking psychiatric medication – for example, what worked, what didn't and any side effects I had.

If you are unsure about any of these details you should ask your doctor or pharmacist.

How do I know if a drug is right for me?

Drugs don't work the same way for everyone, so when your doctor is deciding which medication to offer you, it's not always possible for them to predict exactly which one will suit you best.

It's important to make sure you find a medication that works for you.

To help you do this you can:

- Discuss any problems with your doctor – they might be able to offer you an alternative type of medication or treatment, or advise you about how to manage your medication to reduce any problems.
- Ask for a second opinion – if you're worried about your diagnosis or treatment, or are unsure about advice you've been given, you can ask your GP or psychiatrist to refer you to another professional for a second opinion.
- Review your medication regularly – your GP or psychiatrist should give you a regular opportunity to discuss how you're getting on. For example, they should ask you how you're feeling, whether you think it's helping and whether you're experiencing any side effects.
- Get a Medicines Use Review from your pharmacist – if you regularly take more than one prescription medicine, or take medicines for a long-term illness, you can talk to your pharmacist about any problems or anxieties you have. There is a video about this service on the NHS Choices website. Ask your pharmacist if you are not offered a review and you think it would be helpful for you.

Remember:

- Pharmacists can give you information about psychiatric drugs as well as GPs.
- Most high street pharmacists have a private consulting room if you don't feel comfortable discussing your prescription over the counter.
- You can take a list of questions with you to help you remember everything you want to ask.
- Some drugs take a while to start working, so you might need to keep taking them for a week or two before deciding whether they're suitable for you.
- If you've been prescribed medication, it is still your decision whether or not to take it – and you have the right to change your mind.

 *I have been on a number of medications and found that my symptoms got much worse on some, but better with others.* 

●● *It took several trials of different medications at different strengths before the right combination worked for me... The message from my experience is not to give up on medication because one drug doesn't work. It may take a while and you may have to try different drugs before you find what is right for you.* ●●

Could I ever be forced to take medication?

In most cases: no. If you're offered medication, you usually have the right to refuse it and to ask for an alternative treatment.

What are the exceptions?

There are some special circumstances where you might be required by law to take medication. These include:

- If you have been admitted to hospital under the Mental Health Act (sometimes called being sectioned).
- If you have been discharged from hospital under certain sections of the Mental Health Act, and are being treated on a community treatment order (CTO).

If you are in a situation like this, you can look at our information on consent to treatment for guidance on what steps you can take to challenge the decision.

How can I prepare for a crisis?

If you are worried that you might be forced to take medication if you become very unwell in the future, you might want to take some time while you're feeling well to write a crisis plan or advance statement.

What's a crisis plan?

In a crisis plan, you can explain:

- which drugs have and haven't helped you in the past

- what you would like to happen, or not to happen, if you become very unwell.

In some cases, these documents can be legally binding. See Mind's pages on 'Planning for a crisis' and 'Advance decisions' for more information.

Can I buy medication online?

A properly registered internet pharmacy will only supply prescription drugs if both:

- you have a prescription from a legitimate prescriber, and
- the prescription is made out specifically for you.

Before buying any kind of medication from an internet pharmacy, you should make sure it carries the General Pharmaceutical Council's registration logo, including a registration number, like this:



You can make sure that the logo is being used legitimately by checking the registration number is listed correctly on the pharmacy regulation body's online register.

Since July 2015, it has been mandatory for all online pharmacies operating in the EU to show the following logo:



What if I don't have a prescription from a doctor?

Buying prescription medication on the internet without a doctor's prescription is extremely unwise and can be very dangerous.

You risk getting a drug that:

- hasn't been manufactured properly or hygienically
- is contaminated
- isn't the correct dosage
- contains a completely different substance to what you were expecting.

You should not trust any website that sells prescription drugs without a legitimate prescription.

What do I need to know about side effects?

As well as potential benefits, every psychiatric drug has the potential to cause unwanted side effects. These can occur after both short-term and long-term use.

Mild side effects might:

- stop once your body has got used to the drug
- be manageable by adjusting how you take the drug (such as taking it with food, or at a different time of day).

Severe side effects might:

- mean that you need to stop taking the drug and seek medical help.

What kind of side effects might I get?

This depends on the drug and your individual reaction to it. Some people get side effects and some people don't. If you do get side effects, these could be mild or severe – there is no way to know how you will react before you start taking the medication.

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If you get side effects, it's generally up to you to decide whether the benefits of taking the drug outweigh the side effects or not.

You can read about side effects associated with particular types of medication on Mind's web pages about:

- side effects of antidepressants
- side effects of antipsychotics
- lithium and other mood stabilisers
- sleeping pills and tranquilisers.

Alternatively, if you want to know about a specific drug, you can look it up in our online medication A–Z.

What should I do if I get side effects?

If you feel:	Then you should:
seriously unwell	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get medical advice immediately – see your GP, local pharmacist, or go to A&E.• Do not drive or operate machinery.
moderately unwell or very worried	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get medical advice within 12 hours – see your GP, local pharmacist, or nurse prescriber.
mildly unwell or uncomfortable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get medical advice in the next few days – see your GP, local pharmacist, or nurse prescriber, or talk to your care coordinator if you have one.• If you have only just started taking the medication, you could consider waiting a few days to see if the side effect wears off by itself.

You can also report any side effect you experience to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) using the Yellow Card scheme.

How likely is it that I'll get side effects?

The likelihood of experiencing different side effects varies for each drug. Your risk of experiencing a side effect is described in most Patient Information Leaflets (PILs – the leaflet that comes in the drug packet) like this:

Very common	affects more than 1 person in 10
Common	affects 1 to 10 people in 100
Uncommon	affects 1 to 10 people in 1,000
Rare	affects 1 to 10 people in 10,000
Very rare	affects fewer than 1 person in 10,000
Not known	We do not know how many people are affected

In other words, if the risk is described as rare (fewer than 1 in 10,000), that means 9,999 people out of 10,000 probably won't experience that side effect.

This data is available for all newer drugs, but not for some of the oldest drugs.

What if I want to stop taking my medication?

Before coming off any drug, it's important to make sure you have all the information and support you need to do it safely. If you decide you want to stop taking your medication, you should:

- avoid stopping suddenly
- discuss it with someone you trust (ideally this will be your doctor)
- if possible, seek help from a support group (Mind's Infoline can give you information about local services in your area).

The longer you have been taking a drug, the more likely it is that you will experience withdrawal effects and find it harder to stop. You may need to reduce the dose very gradually in order to minimise these effects.

Remember: whether to continue or stop taking a psychiatric drug is your decision – and you have the right to change your mind.

If you've discussed your wishes with your doctor and you're not happy with their advice, you have the right to ask for a second opinion. You can also read Mind's pages on 'Complaining about health and social care' for guidance on how to make a complaint.

What are the risks of coming off medication suddenly?

The main risks are:

- Unpleasant withdrawal effects – you are more likely to experience withdrawal effects if you stop suddenly.
- Danger to your health – with some drugs, withdrawal effects can be dangerous if you have been taking them for more than 2–3 months. These include lithium, clozapine and benzodiazepine tranquillisers.
- Your symptoms might come back.

Having said this, some people find they can stop taking a drug suddenly, even after they have taken it for a long time, with no adverse effects.

For more information on coming off, see Mind's resource 'Coming off psychiatric drugs' on mind.org.uk.

If you want to support someone else to come off their medication, that online resource also contains information for friends and family.

What's the Yellow Card scheme?

The Yellow Card scheme is a way of helping the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) collect information about the side effects of different drugs.

They do this so that they can:

- make sure drug manufacturers list side effects accurately. For example, if lots of people report a side effect, they might need to reassess how common it is, or add a new warning to the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL); if enough people report a very serious side effect, the drug may be taken off the market
- help other people decide whether to take the drug in future by giving more accurate information.

If you experience side effects after taking a particular medication, you can report them through the Yellow Card website (yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk) or on a yellow report card which you can get from your pharmacist. Alternatively you can ask a health professional to do this for you.

It's completely voluntary, so you don't have to do this if you don't want to.

What is a drug's half-life?

The half-life of a drug is the time it takes for the amount of it in your body to be reduced by half. This depends on how the body processes and gets rid of the drug, and can vary from a few hours to a few days.

No matter what dosage of a particular drug you're on or how long you've been taking it for, its half-life is always the same.

Why does my medication's half-life matter?

A drug's half-life matters because usually:

- a short half-life = more withdrawal problems
- a long half-life = fewer withdrawal problems.

So if you're taking a drug with a short half-life and having problems with withdrawal, it might be possible for you to switch to a related drug with a longer half-life, which could be easier to come off.

You can find out the half-life of a specific drug by looking it up in Mind's 'Psychiatric medication A-Z' on mind.org.uk.

The half-life given for any drug is not an exact figure and, in practice, it can vary a lot between individuals.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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