



Psychiatric medication

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 problem
- reduce the symptoms of mental health problems
- prevent the return of mental health problems and their symptoms (also known as relapse).

This page has information on:

- [What types of psychiatric medication are there?](#)
- [Will I be offered medication for my mental health?](#)
- [How long might I need to take medication for?](#)
- [Where can I find out more about psychiatric medication?](#)

What types of psychiatric medication are there?

The main types of psychiatric medication are:

- antidepressants
- antipsychotics
- sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers
- lithium and other mood stabilisers.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants are usually prescribed to help with moderate or severe [depression](#). This may include experiencing depression as part of another mental health problem.

You might also be offered antidepressants if you experience [anxiety](#), [obsessive-compulsive disorder \(OCD\)](#) or [eating problems](#).

See our pages on [antidepressants](#) for more information, including our [A to Z list of antidepressant medications](#).

Antipsychotics

Antipsychotics may be prescribed to reduce the symptoms of:

- [psychosis](#)
- [schizophrenia](#)

- [schizoaffective disorder](#)
- severe anxiety, in some cases.

They are sometimes also prescribed if you are experiencing [bipolar disorder](#). This is because they can help control [hypomania and mania](#).

See our pages on [antipsychotics](#) for more information, including our [A to Z list of antipsychotic medications](#).

Sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers

These drugs may be prescribed to help you sleep if you experience severe insomnia (difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep). Or you may be offered them if you experience severe anxiety, to help you feel calm. You may hear them called anti-anxiety drugs if they are used to help with anxiety.

See our pages on [sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers](#) for more information, including our [A to Z list of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers](#).

Lithium and other mood stabilisers

These drugs can help stabilise your mood if you experience extreme mood swings. For example, you may be offered them if you are diagnosed with bipolar disorder. If you take them for a longer period, they can also reduce the risk of symptoms returning in future.

These drugs may also be prescribed for hypomania and mania. Or they may be offered for some cases of severe depression or schizoaffective disorder.

See our pages on [lithium and other mood stabilisers](#) for more information.

Will I be offered medication for my mental health?

Whether or not you are offered medication for your mental health is likely to depend on:

- what mental health problems you are diagnosed with
- what your symptoms are
- how severely your mental health problem affects you.

There are many different types of mental health treatment to help you cope with your symptoms. You may be offered other treatments instead of medication. Or you may be prescribed medication at the same time as another treatment, such as a [talking therapy](#).

How long might I need to take medication for?

This depends on what mental health problems you experience, and how severely they affect your life.

For some mental health problems, you might only take medication for a short, specific period of time. For example, this may be to help with an episode of psychosis or if you have difficulty sleeping.

For other problems, you might take medication for a longer period. This could be if you have repeated problems with your mental health. Or if there is a significant risk that your symptoms will return if you stop taking medication. For example, you may take medication for a longer period if you are diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Your GP or psychiatrist should regularly review your treatment with you. They should do this even if you have taken medication for a long time. This is to make sure it is still the best option for you.

Where can I find out more about psychiatric medication?

Anyone who prescribes you medication should be able to give you information about your treatment. Your pharmacist can also provide lots of information about medication.

These websites allow you to search for detailed information about a specific medication:

- [NHS medicines A to Z](#)
- [British National Formulary \(BNF\) drugs information](#)
- [electronic medicines compendium \(eMC\)](#)
- [Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency \(MHRA\) products search](#)

Why do some medications have different names?

Any individual medication can have two kinds of name:

- A **generic name**. This is the drug's medical name, describing the active chemical in the drug. There will only be one generic name for a specific drug.
- A **trade or brand name**. These are names given to a drug by companies which manufacture the drug. Individual drugs can have several different trade names.

For example, the antidepressant with the generic name fluoxetine is also known by the trade names Olena, Oxactin, Prozac and Prozep. These are all names for the same medicine, containing the same active ingredient.

Whatever medication you are taking, it is useful to know the generic and trade names for a certain drug. This is because different people might refer to the same drug using different names.

What do I need to know before I take medication?

Before deciding to take any drug, it helps to have all the information you need to make an informed choice. As a start, you could use the following list of statements and see if you can answer 'yes' to all of them.

I understand:

- **what** the drug is
- **why** I have been offered it
- what **other treatment and support** options are available, such as [talking therapies](#), [peer support](#) and [complementary and alternative therapies](#)
- what the possible **benefits and risks** of taking medication are
- what the possible **side effects** are and how likely I am to develop them
- **how, when** and **how much** of the medication I may need to take
- how long I may need to take the medication before it **begins working**
- **how long** I might need to continue taking the medication for. For example, if it is for a few days or weeks, or for a longer period
- **how to store** the medication safely, such as in a fridge
- **how to stop** taking the medication safely
- what [different names](#) the drug might be called
- **what to do if my medication runs out**. See our page on [accessing medication](#) for more information.

I have:

- **checked the ingredients list** and know that there's nothing in the drug that I'm allergic to, intolerant of, or don't want to take. For example, some drugs contain lactose or gelatin
- **read the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL)** that comes in the drug packet, and understand the information it has about my medication. Our [A to Z of psychiatric medication](#) has links to download PILs for different psychiatric drugs.

I have told my doctor if I:

- take any **other medication**, including non-prescription medicines
- have any **other physical or mental health problems**
- am **pregnant or breastfeeding**, or planning to get pregnant in the future

- have any **previous experiences of psychiatric medication**. For example, this may include what I took, what worked and what didn't, and any side effects I experienced.

If you are unsure about any of these details, you can talk to your doctor or pharmacist. If this feels like it might be a difficult conversation, our page on [talking to your GP](#) may help.

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

Medications can work in different ways for different people. It's not always possible to predict exactly which drug will suit you. But there are things you can do to help find the medication that works for best you:

- **Review your medication regularly.** Your doctor or psychiatrist should give you a regular chance to talk about how you are getting on with your medication. For example, they should ask how you are feeling and whether the medication is helping. You can also discuss whether you are experiencing any side effects.
- **Discuss any problems with your GP or psychiatrist.** They might be able to offer you an alternative type of medication or treatment. Or they can advise you about how to manage your medication to reduce any problems.
- **Ask for a second opinion.** Sometimes you may feel worried or unsure about your diagnosis or treatment. You can ask your GP or psychiatrist to refer you to another healthcare professional for a second opinion. You have the right to do this.
- **Pharmacists can give you information about your medication**, for example about side effects. Most high street pharmacists have a private consulting room. This can help if you don't feel comfortable talking to them over the counter. You could take a list of questions with you to help remember everything you want to ask.
- **Some drugs take a while to start working.** You might need to take them for a certain period before deciding whether they are suitable for you.

Remember: it is your decision whether or not medication is the right treatment for you. You have the right to change your mind.

"It took several trials of different medications at different strengths before the right combination worked for me."

Could I ever be forced to take medication?

In most cases, you cannot be forced to take medication. If you are offered medication, you usually have the right to refuse it and ask for an alternative treatment.

When might I be forced to take medication?

There are some circumstances in which it might be legal to give you medication, even if you haven't agreed to take it. These include if you have been:

- admitted to hospital under some sections of the [Mental Health Act](#). This is sometimes called being [sectioned](#)
- discharged from hospital under certain sections of the Mental Health Act, and you are being treated on a [community treatment order \(CTO\)](#)
- assessed under the [Mental Capacity Act](#) as not having capacity to consent to treatment. You may be given medical treatment if it is assessed to be in your [best interests](#).

See our pages on [consent to treatment](#) for more information about this, including what steps you can take to challenge decisions.

Planning for a crisis

Some of us may worry about being forced to take medication if we become very unwell in the future. Remember: it is not common to be forced to take medication.

But if you are concerned about this, it may help to plan for a future crisis while you are feeling well. This can help healthcare professionals know your wishes in advance, in case you lose capacity to make decisions about your own treatment.

There are several ways in which to outline your future wishes, including:

- An [advanced decision](#) about any treatments you wish to refuse in future. This is a legally binding statement of instructions for healthcare professionals.
- An [advance statement](#) to outline your general wishes for future treatment. Advance statements are not legally binding. But they can still help healthcare professionals know your preferences for how you wish to be treated.

See our pages on [planning for a crisis](#) and [advance decisions](#) for more information.

Accessing psychiatric medication

This page covers:

- [Who can prescribe psychiatric medication?](#)
- [Do I have to pay for prescriptions?](#)
- [What if I run out of medication?](#)

Accessing medication during coronavirus

Visit our page on [accessing treatment and support during coronavirus](#) if you are concerned about getting medication during the pandemic.

Who can prescribe psychiatric medication?

Your GP or a psychiatrist are the most likely people to prescribe you psychiatric medication. Some nurses and pharmacists may also be qualified to prescribe you medication.

Who prescribes your medication may depend on what type of medication it is and how long you have been taking it. For example, you may be given your first prescriptions by a psychiatrist and monitored by a mental health team. But once you have got used to taking the medication, your GP may be able to give ongoing prescriptions.

You may also be able to use an [online service to order repeat prescriptions](#) for some medications. This means you no longer need to collect a paper prescription to get your medication. But you can still speak to your GP or pharmacist about your medication, such as any side effects you experience.

Depot injections

If you are prescribed [depot injections](#) of antipsychotic medication, these will usually be given to you by a healthcare professional in a community setting. For example, this may be in a clinic, health centre or in your own home.

You will never be asked to manage or administer depot injections yourself.

Do I have to pay for prescriptions?

In Wales, prescriptions for medication are free of charge. In England, some people need to pay for prescriptions, while others can get them for free.

The NHS has a [tool to check whether you can get help for the costs of any NHS treatment](#). This includes whether you may be entitled to free prescriptions. It also has [a list of people who can get free prescriptions](#).

If you are not entitled to free prescriptions, it may help to buy a [prescription prepayment certificate](#). These allow you to pre-pay for as many prescriptions as you need for either 3 or 12 months. This can work out cheaper than paying for individual prescriptions, depending on how many prescriptions you need per month.

What if I run out of medication?

If you run out of medication, the person who usually prescribes your drugs may be able to arrange a prescription for you. If that isn't possible, you can ask a pharmacy for an emergency supply until you can get a prescription.

To get an emergency supply of medication, you must have been prescribed the medicine before. And the pharmacist must agree with the following:

- You need the medicine immediately.

- The dose is appropriate for you to take.

The pharmacist usually needs to see you face-to-face. And they usually need evidence that you have been prescribed the medication before. For example, this could be your last box of medication or most recent prescription.

If the pharmacist gives you a prescription, they will make a note of the following details:

- Your name and address.
- The nature of the emergency.
- The date of the emergency supply.
- The name, quantity, form (such as capsules, tablets or liquid) and strength of the medication.

If the pharmacist can't prescribe an emergency supply of medication, they can still advise you on how to get any medical care you may need.

The NHS has more information on [where you can get an emergency supply of medication](#). If you need medication outside your GP or pharmacy's usual hours, the NHS also has information on [how to access out-of-hours medication](#).

Medication shortages

Sometimes there may be shortages of certain medications. Or certain drugs may be discontinued, which means they are no longer produced.

If your medication is affected by a shortage, your pharmacist may be able to contact other pharmacies. They can check if your medication is in stock. It may help to take your prescription to a pharmacy before you actually need the medication. This gives the pharmacist time to order your medication from elsewhere before you run out.

If you are in contact with a mental health service, they may also be able to help you find someone to give you your medication.

If your medication is not available anywhere, you might be offered an alternative drug. For example, this may be the same type of medication, but a different brand. But this isn't always suitable for everyone.

If you are worried about shortages or whether your medication may not be available, you can discuss this with your GP or pharmacist.

Where can I buy medication online?

The safest way to buy psychiatric medication online is from a registered internet pharmacy. These pharmacies will only supply you with medication if:

- you have a prescription from a legitimate prescriber, such as your GP or psychiatrist

- the prescription is made out specifically for you.

Before buying any kind of medication from an internet pharmacy, check whether their website shows the General Pharmaceutical Council's registration logo. This should include a registration number for that specific pharmacy. It should look like this:



You can search for the registration number on the [General Pharmaceutical Council's online register](#). If the pharmacy is listed here, then it is a legitimate pharmacy.

What if I don't have a prescription?

Buying medication on the internet without a valid prescription can be very dangerous. If you buy medication from an unregistered pharmacy or a website that doesn't require a valid prescription, you risk getting a drug that:

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

Side effects of psychiatric medication

As well as the possible benefits, every psychiatric drug may cause unwanted side effects. These side effects can happen with short-term or long-term use.

This page covers:

- [What side effects might I experience?](#)
- [What should I do if I get side effects?](#)
- [How likely am I to get side effects?](#)
- [Can I report any side effects I experience?](#)

What side effects might I experience?

This side effects you may experience depend on which medication you take and your individual reaction to it. Some people get certain side effects while others don't.

If you do get side effects, they could be mild or severe. There is no way to know how you will react before you start taking the medication.

If you experience side effects, it is worth thinking about whether the benefits of taking the drug outweigh any negative effects. This is something you can discuss with your GP or pharmacist.

We have information on the side effects you may experience from different types of psychiatric medication. See our pages on:

- [side effects of antidepressants](#)
- [side effects of antipsychotics](#)
- [side effects of benzodiazepines](#)
- [non-benzodiazepine sleeping pills](#), including information on side effects.

If you want to find the possible side effects of an individual drug, you can check the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) that comes in the package for your medication. Or you can search for your drug in our [A to Z of psychiatric medication](#) and download the relevant PIL for your drug.

What should I do if I get side effects?

If you feel seriously unwell

- Get medical advice immediately.
- Contact your GP or pharmacist right away, or call 999 for an ambulance.
- Do not drive or operate machinery. This includes driving to seek medical help.

If you feel moderately unwell or very worried

- Get medical advice within 12 hours.
- Contact [NHS 111](#) or see your GP or pharmacist.

If you feel mildly unwell or uncomfortable

- Get medical advice in the next few days.
- Contact [NHS 111](#) or see your GP or pharmacist. Or contact your nurse prescriber or care coordinator, if you have one.

- If you have only just started taking the medication, it may help to wait a few days to see if the side effects wear off. But if you are concerned, you can still speak to your GP or pharmacist or call NHS 111 for advice.

How likely am I to 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 PILs for specific drugs. It usually looks like this:

- **Very common** (affects more than 1 person in 10).
- **Common** (affects between 1 in 10 and 1 in 100 people).
- **Uncommon** (affects between 1 in 100 and 1 in 1,000 people).
- **Rare** (affects between 1 in 1,000 and 1 in 10,000 people).
- **Very rare** (affects fewer than 1 in 10,000 people).
- **Not known** (we do not know how many people are affected).

In other words, if the risk is described as very 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 older drugs.

Can I report any side effects I experience?

If you experience any side effects, you can report them via the [Yellow Card scheme](#). This scheme collects information about the side effects of different drugs. It is a voluntary scheme, so you don't have to report side effects if you don't wish to.

What is the Yellow Card scheme?

The Yellow Card scheme collects information about the side effects of different drugs. It is run by the [Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency](#) (MHRA).

The scheme exists for a few reasons:

- **Making sure drug manufacturers list side effects accurately.** For example, if lots of people report a side effect, manufacturers might need to consider how common it is. In some cases, they may need to add a warning to the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL).
- **Assessing whether a drug may need to be taken off the market.** This may be necessary if enough people report a very serious side effect.
- **Helping other people decide whether to take the drug in future** by giving more accurate information about side effects.

If you experience side effects after taking a particular medication, you can report them online through the [Yellow Card website](#). Or you can get a report card from your pharmacist. You can also ask a healthcare professional to report side effects for you.

The Yellow Card scheme is completely voluntary. You don't have to report any side effects you may experience, if you don't want to.

What if I want to stop taking my medication?

If you decide you want to stop taking your medication, it is usually best to:

- **avoid stopping suddenly**, as this can cause severe withdrawal problems
- **discuss it with someone you trust**, ideally this your doctor.

You may also find it helpful to join a support group. [Mind's Infoline](#) can give you information about local services in your area.

The longer you have been taking a psychiatric drug, the more likely it is that you will experience withdrawal effects when you stop. This might make it feel harder to stop. You may need to gradually reduce your dose 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 our pages on [complaining about health and social care](#) for guidance on how to make a complaint.

If you've discussed your wishes with your doctor and you're not happy with their advice, you can ask them to refer you to another healthcare professional for a second opinion. You have the right to do this.

You can also read our 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 risks of coming off medication suddenly include the following:

- You are more likely to experience unpleasant withdrawal effects.

- You may experience withdrawal effects which are dangerous to your health. This is more likely with certain drugs, such as [lithium](#), [clozapine](#) and [benzodiazepines](#), if you have taken them longer than a certain period of time.
- The symptoms of your mental health problem might come back (also known as relapse).

Some people may find that they can stop taking a drug suddenly with no adverse effects. This can happen even after taking the medication for a long time. But the safest way to avoid unpleasant or dangerous side effects is to come off your medication gradually.

See our pages on [coming off psychiatric drugs](#) for more information. This includes guidance on deciding to come off, planning withdrawal and finding support, and supporting someone else with coming off their medication.

What is a drug's half-life?

The half-life of a drug is the time it takes for the amount of a drug's active substance in your body to reduce by half. This depends on how the body processes and gets rid of the drug. It can vary from a few hours to a few days, or sometimes weeks.

No matter what dosage of a 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:

- a short half-life usually means more withdrawal problems
- a long half-life usually means fewer withdrawal problems.

If you are taking a drug with a short half-life and having problems with withdrawal, it might be possible for you to switch to a similar drug with a longer half-life. This longer half-life drug might be easier to come off.

The half-life can also be a guide for how long a drug will take to reach a stable level in your body when you first start taking it. Generally, it will take about five times the drug's half-life to build a stable level in your body. Once a drug's level is stable in your body, any early side effects you experience from the drug may start to decrease.

Where can I find the half-life of my medication?

You can compare the half-lives of different types of drug by looking at our comparison tables for:

- [antidepressants](#)
- [antipsychotics](#)

- [benzodiazepines](#)
- [Z drugs and other sleeping pills](#)
- [anti-anxiety drugs](#)

The half-life given for any drug is not an exact figure. It can vary a lot between different people. These tables should only act as a guide.

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