

Mental Health Medications Overview

Understanding Your Medications

If you are prescribed a medication, be sure that you:

- Tell the doctor about all medications and vitamin supplements you are already taking.
- Remind your doctor about any allergies and any problems you have had with medicines.
- Understand how to take the medicine before you start using it and take your medicine as instructed.
- Don't take medicines prescribed for another person or give yours to someone else.
- Call your doctor right away if you have any problems with your medicine or if you are worried that it might be doing more harm than good. Your doctor may be able to adjust the dose or change your prescription to a different one that may work better for you.
- Report serious side effects to the FDA MedWatch Adverse Event Reporting program online at <http://www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch> or by phone [1-800-332-1088]. You or your doctor may send a report.

Antidepressants: What are antidepressants? Antidepressants are medications commonly used to treat depression. Antidepressants are also used for other health conditions, such as anxiety, pain and insomnia. Although antidepressants are not FDA-approved specifically to treat ADHD, antidepressants are sometimes used to treat ADHD in adults. The most popular types of antidepressants are called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Examples of SSRIs include:

- [Fluoxetine](#)
- [Citalopram](#)
- [Sertraline](#)
- [Paroxetine](#)
- [Escitalopram](#)

Other types of antidepressants are serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). SNRIs are similar to SSRIs and include [venlafaxine](#) and [duloxetine](#).

Another antidepressant that is commonly used is bupropion. [Bupropion](#) is a third type of antidepressant which works differently than either SSRIs or SNRIs. Bupropion is also used to treat seasonal affective disorder and to help people stop smoking. SSRIs, SNRIs, and bupropion are popular because they do not cause as many side effects as older classes of antidepressants, and seem to help a broader group of depressive and anxiety disorders. Older

antidepressant medications include tricyclics, tetracyclics, and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs). For some people, tricyclics, tetracyclics, or MAOIs may be the best medications.

Anti-Anxiety Medications: What are anti-anxiety medications?

Anti-anxiety medications help reduce the symptoms of anxiety, such as panic attacks, or extreme fear and worry. The most common anti-anxiety medications are called benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepines can treat generalized anxiety disorder. In the case of panic disorder or social phobia (social anxiety disorder), benzodiazepines are usually second-line treatments, behind SSRIs or other antidepressants. Benzodiazepines used to treat anxiety disorders include:

- [Clonazepam](#)
- [Alprazolam](#)
- [Lorazepam](#)

Short half-life (or short-acting) benzodiazepines (such as [Lorazepam](#)) and beta-blockers are used to treat the short-term symptoms of anxiety. Beta-blockers help manage physical symptoms of anxiety, such as trembling, rapid heartbeat, and sweating that people with phobias (an overwhelming and unreasonable fear of an object or situation, such as public speaking) experience in difficult situations. Taking these medications for a short period of time can help the person keep physical symptoms under control and can be used “as needed” to reduce acute anxiety. [Buspirone](#) (which is unrelated to the benzodiazepines) is sometimes used for the long-term treatment of chronic anxiety. In contrast to the benzodiazepines, buspirone must be taken every day for a few weeks to reach its full effect. It is not useful on an “as-needed” basis.

Stimulants: What are Stimulants?

As the name suggests, stimulants increase alertness, attention, and energy, as well as elevate blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). Stimulant medications are often prescribed to treat children, adolescents, or adults diagnosed with ADHD.

Stimulants used to treat ADHD include:

- [Methylphenidate](#)
- [Amphetamine](#)
- [Dextroamphetamine](#)
- [Lisdexamfetamine Dimesylate](#)

Note: In 2002, the FDA approved the non-stimulant medication atomoxetine for use as a treatment for ADHD. Two other non-stimulant antihypertensive medications, [clonidine](#) and [guanfacine](#), are also approved for treatment of ADHD in children and adolescents. One of these non-stimulant medications is often tried first in a young person with ADHD, and if response is insufficient, then a stimulant is prescribed.

Stimulants are also prescribed to treat other health conditions, including narcolepsy, and occasionally depression (especially in older or chronically medically ill people and in those who have not responded to other treatments).

Antipsychotics: What are antipsychotics?

Antipsychotic medicines are primarily used to manage psychosis. The word "[psychosis](#)" is used to describe conditions that affect the mind, and in which there has been some loss of contact with reality, often including delusions (false, fixed beliefs) or hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not really there). It can be a symptom of a physical condition such as drug abuse or a mental disorder such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or very severe depression (also known as "psychotic depression").

Antipsychotic medications are often used in combination with other medications to treat delirium, dementia, and mental health conditions, including:

- [Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#)
- [Severe Depression](#)
- [Eating Disorders](#)
- [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#)
- [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder \(OCD\)](#)
- [Generalized Anxiety Disorder](#)

Antipsychotic medicines do not cure these conditions. They are used to help relieve symptoms and improve quality of life.

Older or first-generation antipsychotic medications are also called conventional "typical" antipsychotics or "neuroleptics". Some of the common typical antipsychotics include:

- [Chlorpromazine](#)
- [Haloperidol](#)
- [Perphenazine](#)
- [Fluphenazine](#)

Newer or second generation medications are also called "atypical" antipsychotics. Some of the common atypical antipsychotics include:

- [Risperidone](#)
- [Olanzapine](#)
- [Quetiapine](#)
- [Ziprasidone](#)
- [Aripiprazole](#)
- [Paliperidone](#)
- [Lurasidone](#)

Mood Stabilizers: What are mood stabilizers?

Mood stabilizers are used primarily to treat bipolar disorder, mood swings associated with other mental disorders, and in some cases, to augment the effect of other medications used to treat depression. [Lithium](#), which is an ineffective mood stabilizer, is approved for the treatment of mania and the maintenance treatment of bipolar disorder. Mood stabilizers work by decreasing abnormal activity in the brain and are also sometimes used to treat:

- Depression (usually along with an antidepressant)
- Schizoaffective Disorder
- Disorders of impulse control
- Certain mental illnesses in children

Anticonvulsant medications are also used as mood stabilizers. They were originally developed to treat seizures, but they were found to help control unstable moods as well. One anticonvulsant commonly used as a mood stabilizer is [valproic acid](#) (also called divalproex sodium). For some people, especially those with "mixed" symptoms of mania and depression or those with rapid-cycling bipolar disorder, valproic acid may work better than lithium. Other anticonvulsants used as mood stabilizers include:

- [Carbamazepine](#)
- [Lamotrigine](#)
- [Oxcarbazepine](#)

Special Groups: Children, Older Adults, Pregnant Women

Children and Adolescents

Many medications used to treat children and adolescents with mental illness are safe and effective. However, some medications have not been studied or approved for use with children or adolescents.

Still, a doctor can give a young person an FDA-approved medication on an "off-label" basis. This means that the doctor prescribes the medication to help the patient even though the medicine is not approved for the specific mental disorder that is being treated or for use by patients under a certain age. Remember:

- It is important to watch children and adolescents who take these medications on an "off-label" basis.
- Children may have different reactions and side effects than adults.
- Some medications have current FDA warnings about potentially dangerous side effects for younger patients.

In addition to medications, other treatments for children and adolescents should be considered, either to be tried first, with medication added later if necessary, or to be provided along with medication. Psychotherapy, family therapy, educational courses, and behavior management techniques can help everyone involved cope with disorders that affect a child's mental health. [Read more about child and adolescent mental health research.](#)

Older Adults

People over 65 have to be careful when taking medications, especially when they're taking many different drugs. Older adults have a higher risk for experiencing bad drug interactions, missing doses, or overdosing.

Older adults also tend to be more sensitive to medications. Even healthy older people react to medications differently than younger people because older people's bodies process and eliminate medications more slowly. Therefore, lower or less frequent doses may be needed for older adults. Before starting a medication, older people and their family members should talk carefully with a physician about whether a medication can affect alertness, memory, or coordination, and how to help ensure that prescribed medications do not increase the risk of falls.

Sometimes memory problems affect older people who take medications for mental disorders. An older adult may forget his or her regular dose and take too much or not enough. A good way to keep track of medicine is to use a seven-day pill box, which can be bought at any pharmacy. At the beginning of each week, older adults and their caregivers fill the box so that it is easy to remember what medicine to take. Many pharmacies also have pill boxes with sections for medications that must be taken more than once a day.