

Understanding Antipsychotic Medications: Side Effects and Monitoring

What are Antipsychotic Medications?

Antipsychotic medications are used to manage symptoms of psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, severe anxiety, OCD, among other conditions. While they can be highly effective, they can also result in side effects.

Common Side Effects:

- **Sedation:** Many antipsychotics can cause drowsiness or a general feeling of lethargy.
 - **What to Look For:** Increased sleepiness, difficulty staying awake during the day, or a general sense of tiredness or fatigue.
- **Constipation:** This can be a common issue due to the effects of antipsychotics on the gastrointestinal system.
 - **What to Look For:** Infrequent bowel movements, difficulty passing stool, or abdominal discomfort.
- **Dizziness:** Antipsychotics can cause dizziness, particularly when standing up quickly.
 - **What to Look For:** Feeling lightheaded, unsteady, or dizzy when changing positions or standing up.
- **Orthostatic Hypotension:** A drop in blood pressure when standing up from a sitting or lying position, leading to dizziness or fainting.
 - **What to Look For:** Lightheadedness, dizziness, or fainting when standing up.

Metabolic Side Effects:

- **Weight Gain:** Can occur with many antipsychotic medications therefore your provider will ask you to monitor weight to ensure no major changes over time
- **Increased Blood Sugar and High Cholesterol:** Your provider will periodically perform bloodwork to ensure no major variations from baseline for blood sugar and cholesterol with antipsychotic medications.

Neurological Side Effects:

- **Tardive Dyskinesia (TD):** Involuntary movements, often of the face and tongue, such as grimacing, lip-smacking, or rapid eye blinking.
 - **What to Look For:** Uncontrolled movements, particularly in the face, arms, and legs.
- **Akathisia:** A feeling of inner restlessness, with an inability to stay still, often accompanied by anxiety.
 - **What to Look For:** Constant movement, fidgeting, or pacing; feelings of restlessness or anxiety.
- **Extrapyramidal Symptoms (EPS):** Symptoms such as tremors, stiffness, bradykinesia (slowness of movement), and muscle rigidity.
 - **What to Look For:** Trembling hands, stiffness in muscles, slow movements, or difficulty starting movements.

FDA Black Box Warning: Antipsychotic medications carry a black boxed warning indicating they are not approved for treating dementia-related psychosis due to an increased risk of mortality in elderly patients. Most deaths are attributed to cardiovascular or infectious events, but it is unclear whether the higher mortality rate is directly caused by the antipsychotics or by certain patient characteristics.

How You Can Help

Stay Informed: Understand the potential side effects and what to watch for. **Keep Appointments:** Regular check-ups are vital for monitoring your health. **Report Changes:** Inform your healthcare provider of any new or worsening symptoms immediately. **Healthy Lifestyle:** Maintain a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and avoid smoking to reduce the risk of metabolic side effects.

Managing Side Effects

If you experience side effects, your healthcare provider may:

- **Adjust the Dose:** Sometimes a lower dose can reduce side effects.
- **Switch Medications:** There may be alternative medications with fewer side effects.
- **Add Medications:** To counteract specific side effects, additional medications may be prescribed.

Important Points

- **Never Stop Medication Suddenly:** Always consult your healthcare provider before making any changes to your medication regimen.
- **Be Honest About Your Symptoms:** Accurate information helps your provider manage your treatment effectively.

If you have any questions or concerns about your antipsychotic medication, please contact your healthcare provider.