

# About Taking Psychiatric Medications

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## **Finding the Right Medication or Combination of Medications**

There are a number of important things that you should know about taking psychiatric medications. The most important of all is the fact that psychiatric medications are all trial and error. There is no way to know in advance what effects a psychiatric medication will have on any given individual. A medicine that works wonders for one person may have intolerable side effects or no effect at all for a second person. Your psychiatrist has to experiment with you to find the right medication or combination of medications for you. This is further complicated by the fact that sometimes it takes days or weeks for a medication to take effect and treat your particular symptoms. Many people expect the first medication they try will solve their problem and take effect immediately. It is important to realize that this is extremely unlikely. It is much more common to have to try several different medications to find one that works well for you. No psychiatrist can predict what outcome you will have by trying any specific psychiatric medication.

## **About Side Effects**

It is quite likely that you will experience some side effects from taking your medication. It is important to realize that all medications have side effects. Even such common and generally accepted medications, such as aspirin or Tylenol, have side effects. You should discuss any side effects you are experiencing with your psychiatrist. Sometimes a change in dosage or the addition of another medication will alleviate the side effects. Side effects often become less severe after you have been taking the medication for several weeks. It is important to realize that unless the side effects are severe, you need to give the medications time to work. If the side effects are severe, talk to your psychiatrist immediately. You may find it helpful to ask the pharmacist to give you the package insert for your medication when you get your prescription filled. This document will list all the side effects for that medication that have been reported in any significant number. It is unlikely that you will experience any severe side effects, but it is important to know what to watch for.

## **Take Your Medications Exactly as Prescribed**

It is critical that you take the medications as prescribed by your psychiatrist. If you do not take the medications as prescribed, it will be difficult to correctly evaluate your response to the medication. Skipping doses or changing the dosage on your own makes it less likely that the medication will work right. Psychiatrists often prescribe an initial minimum dose so that your body will have time to adjust to the medication. The medication will then be gradually increased until it has the desired effect or it becomes clear that it is not adequately treating the symptoms. This strategy is aimed at controlling the side effects and lessening the chance that they will be severe. Ask your psychiatrist what to do if you accidentally miss a dose. For some medications, it is important to take the dose as soon as you realize you have missed it. For other medications, it is important not to take the missed dose as this could result in an overdose. Your psychiatrist can recommend the correct action for your particular medication.

## **Reducing or Stopping Medications**

You should never discontinue a psychiatric medication without receiving direction to do so from your psychiatrist. Abruptly stopping a psychiatric medication can often cause problems that would be avoided if you gradually reduce the dose. When you are reducing the dose, it is important to watch for the return of symptoms for your illness. The return of symptoms can happen gradually and without you realizing it. This is another reason why you should not change your medications without the advice of your psychiatrist. Your psychiatrist can monitor you for the return of symptoms. It is also beneficial to have a close family member or trusted friend that can watch for the return of symptoms.

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### **Sometimes Symptoms may Return**

Sometimes symptoms will return even when you are still taking your medications as prescribed by the doctor. This should be discussed with your doctor immediately. Some people find that after a period of time, a given medication will simply stop working for them. This may indicate the need to try a different medication. Some people also find that stress can increase their symptoms and that when they are under stress, they need more medication. Maintaining a good dialogue with your psychiatrist about symptoms you are experiencing is important.

### **Taking Other Medications at the Same Time**

Always inform your doctor of any medications you are taking in addition to what he or she prescribes for you. Interactions can occur between medications and some medications cannot be taken together. This also applies to over-the-counter medications such as cold remedies. The interactions can be severe and in some cases, fatal. If you do not have access to your psychiatrist, you can check with your pharmacist on interactions with over-the-counter medications. They will be glad to advise you. You should also discuss any herbal medications or dietary supplements you are taking. Many herbs are drugs in their own right with side effects and interactions as well. Just because a product in the health food store is advertised as natural does not mean it is safe to take with your medications.

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