

Side Effects of Antipsychotics - A Guide to Help You Choose an Antipsychotic

Antipsychotics are a group of medicines that are used primarily to treat the symptoms of psychosis and schizophrenia. They are also used in the illness bipolar disorder to help stabilise mood.

With antipsychotics, particular groups of side effects are often given as a reason why people stop taking their medicine. This guide compares these side effects for the commonly used antipsychotics. Service users should check the patient information leaflet for each antipsychotic (including the antipsychotics not covered in this guide) for a full list of all side effects, or ask their mental health professional for more information.

It is important to remember that all medicines cause side effects and that with each drug there are some side effects that are very common and that most people will have and that other side effects are rare and very few people will have them. Some side effects can be relatively mild and can ease with time. After talking it over with your mental health professional, you may decide that the benefits of continuing to take the medicine outweigh the side effects it causes.

Groups of Side effects

This section explains what some of the common side effects of antipsychotics are. Remember when reading this section that you will not get all of the side effects, some people might have a few of them and some people might not get any.

Movement Disorders

Mental health professionals often refer to these problems as extra pyramidal side effects (EPSEs) as this refers to the part of the brain where this side effect arises. Symptoms of movement disorders are:

- Muscle stiffness that can affect the limbs and other parts of the body and is described by people as their arms or legs feeling heavy or like a lead pipe
- Tremor or shaking
- Inner restlessness, an unpleasant sensation where you feel you have to move and can't sit still or stop moving. Healthcare professionals call this problem akathisia

Weight Gain

Some people taking antipsychotics can put on weight. This is probably caused by an effect of the antipsychotics on appetite. You do have some control over this and eating a healthy diet can reduce this problem.

Anticholinergic Side effects

Some antipsychotics block the normal effect of the substance acetylcholine in the body. In some people, this side effect can ease over time. Symptoms of this effect can include:

- Dry mouth
- Blurred vision
- Constipation
- Poor memory

Sedation

This is feeling sleepy or sedated. This side effect can ease over time. With some medicines, we can reduce the effect of this problem by starting at a low dose and increasing slowly as the person becomes used to the medicine and the sedation gets less. This side effect might affect the ability to drive or operate machinery.

Hypotension

This refers to an effect of the medicine on your blood pressure. Some antipsychotics can cause your blood pressure to be lower than normal. This can cause you to feel faint or dizzy, especially when you stand up suddenly. This side effect can ease with time and we can reduce the problem by starting at a low dose and increasing slowly if needed.

Raised Prolactin

Prolactin is a natural hormone in the body. Some antipsychotics can cause the levels of this hormone to rise to higher levels than normal. Healthcare professionals call this hyperprolactinaemia. For some people this rise does not cause any symptoms and is only discovered after a routine blood test. Symptoms of hyperprolactinaemia are:

- It can cause a woman's menstrual periods to become irregular or stop altogether. This does not mean that you can't become pregnant. This is the most common effect of raised prolactin
- Enlargement or tenderness of the breasts in both women and men
- Less often, raised prolactin might make the breasts leak milk when a woman is not pregnant or breast feeding. Very rarely this can occur in men
- Sexual problems including lack of desire, performance problems or lack of pleasure

Cerebrovascular Events

Use of antipsychotic drugs in people with dementia is associated with increased mortality related to cerebrovascular events. This risk appears to apply to both first and second generation drugs (EMEA, 2008).

Relative risks of common adverse effects of antipsychotics

Table adapted from the Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines 10th Edition 2010.

Medicine	Sedation	Weight Gain	Movement Disorders	Raised Prolactin	Anticholinergic effects	Lowered Blood Pressure
Amisulpride	Very Low	Low	Low	High	Very Low	Very Low
Aripiprazole	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low*	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low
Chlorpromazine	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Clozapine	High	High	Very Low*	Very Low	High	High
Flupentixol	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low
Haloperidol	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low
Olanzapine	Moderate	High	Low	Very Low	Low	Low
Quetiapine	Moderate	Moderate	Very Low	Very Low	Low	Moderate
Risperidone	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate

NOTE: This table is intended to show comparative risks of various adverse events for commonly prescribed antipsychotics. Refer to the SpC of each drug for the absolute rates of particular adverse events.

* Aripiprazole and clozapine are both very unlikely to cause stiffness and tremor. There is a low risk of akathisia with clozapine and a low / moderate risk of akathisia for aripiprazole.