

**HeadsUp** 

**Understanding Medication  
for Psychosis:  
Applications, Risks & Benefits**

## Medication Use for Psychosis

If you're considering or currently taking medication to manage psychosis, *you are not alone in this process*. Many people find that medication(s) help them regain a sense of stability and control by reducing their symptoms. It is normal throughout the course of your time in treatment to have questions about why medications may be prescribed, how they work, and what the risks may be.

Remember, every treatment path is unique. In general, medication is used to help manage symptoms and reduce the risk of recurrence. It is often part of a long-term, multi-faceted strategy for mental health stability.

**While we hope the information provided here is informative, empowering, and useful, it is intended as a generalized introduction for educational purposes only. It is not a replacement for, or substitution of, medical guidance and advice from a trained medical professional.**

## Frequently Asked Questions

**When it comes to taking medication for psychosis, it is normal to have questions, especially if you or a loved one are new to engaging in care. Below are some frequently asked questions we receive and the corresponding answers we generally provide.**

### Why might I need medication?

Medications are prescribed to help manage the symptoms of psychosis and/or other related symptoms you may be experiencing. They work by affecting chemical messengers, or neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and serotonin which play a role in mood, thought, and perception in the brain. By regulating these chemicals, medications may help reduce or eliminate common symptoms.

### What are these medications?

**There are several types of medications used to treat psychosis and related symptoms:**

#### Antipsychotics (Neuroleptics):

These are currently the primary medications used to treat psychosis symptoms. They can help people think, feel, sleep, and communicate better.

There are two main types of antipsychotics: **typical** (first-generation) and **atypical** (second-generation).

**Typical** (first-generation) antipsychotics have been prescribed since the 1950s and they can be effective in controlling positive symptoms (like hallucinations). However, they often come with more severe movement-related side effects, such as tremors or stiffness.

**Atypical** (second-generation) antipsychotics have been prescribed since the 1980s and they are good at treating positive symptoms (like hallucinations) and perhaps negative symptoms (like lack of motivation). They tend to have fewer side effects related to movement, but they can cause more metabolic side effects, like weight gain.

#### Other Types of Medications :

Depending on your specific needs and symptoms, other medications to address experiences like depression, anxiety, mood instability, attention, or cognitive impairment may be incorporated in your treatment plan.

# FAQs continued...

## What should I expect when first starting medication?

Medications for psychosis and related symptoms can have a significant impact, but it's important to remember they will take some time to start working effectively. You may not see immediate results, and it can take weeks or even longer for the medication to reach its full potential.

**Initial adjustments:** In the beginning, you may experience some side effects as your body adjusts. These can include drowsiness, dizziness, restlessness, or muscle stiffness. These side effects are often temporary, but it's important to let your prescriber know if they persist or feel particularly troublesome.

**Side effects to watch out for when first starting medication:** Though not experienced by everyone, some medications can cause more significant side effects. **Some things to be aware of include:**

- Movement issues: Uncontrolled tremors, muscle stiffness, or restlessness
- Increased appetite and weight gain, which can affect energy and motivation
- Drowsiness or fatigue, which might improve over time or with a dose adjustment
- Dizziness or lightheadedness, especially when standing up quickly
- Changes in metabolism, such as high blood sugar or cholesterol
- Sleep changes: Some people feel sleepier, while others may have trouble sleeping

**If you notice anything unusual or uncomfortable, talk to your prescriber! They can help adjust the dosage or switch medications if needed. It is important that you and your prescriber discuss any modifications to your medication plan.**

## How do I take my medication?

Depending on your preference and in collaboration with your medical prescriber, your medication will commonly be in the form of a pill or injection. How often the medication is taken depends on the type of medication and the type of administration.

## How long will it take for the medication to start working?

It can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks to notice the effects of medication. For some people, the reduction in symptoms and feeling better may be gradual.

## How do I know if my medication is working?

Tracking symptoms with your prescriber and therapist will help monitor your progress. Some people describe a general sense of being "clearer" or more in control. You may notice improvements in how you feel mentally and emotionally.

## What should I do if I miss a dose?

Review the information on your medication insert and medication plan with your prescriber. If you are not sure, contact them. It is important to take medications as prescribed to avoid unnecessary side effects, but sometimes medications are missed. Do not double up on medications.

## Can antipsychotic medication affect my mental state or emotions?

Some people report feeling emotionally "flat" or less connected to their feelings while taking antipsychotics. This can be a side effect, but it's important to talk to your prescriber if this is distressing. Your medication or dosage may be adjusted.

# FAQs continued...

## What serious side effects should I expect from antipsychotic medications?

Serious side effects can happen but are not common. Some antipsychotics, particularly typical (first-generation) ones, can cause movement disorders like Tardive Dyskinesia (involuntary movements) or extrapyramidal symptoms (like tremors and rigidity).

Rare but serious side effects include metabolic changes (increased blood sugar or cholesterol) or heart issues. A less common but significant side effect is Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome, a rare but potentially fatal condition, which requires immediate medical attention. **Symptoms may include:**

- High fever (over 104 degrees F)
- Muscle rigidity
- Altered mental status (confusion, agitation, coma)
- Autonomic dysfunction (irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, sweating)
- Increased salivation

## What happens if I experience severe side effects?

If you experience severe or unusual side effects (such as severe dizziness, chest pain, high fever, or uncontrollable movements), you should contact your prescriber immediately, and you may need to go to an urgent care facility or an emergency room. In some cases, a different medication or dosage might be needed.

## Can I drink alcohol while taking medications?

Alcohol should generally be avoided because it can interfere with the effectiveness of the medication, and may lead to other dangerous side effects, especially in combination with sedating medications. Always consult your prescriber before consuming alcohol while on any psychiatric medication.

## Can I take other medications or supplements with psychiatric medications?

Always inform your prescriber about any other medications, including over-the-counter medications or herbal supplements, you may be taking or considering taking. Some medications can interact with psychiatric medications, affecting how they work or increasing side effects.

## How do I pay for my medication?

Psychiatric medications are usually covered through your medical insurance. If you do not have medical insurance, or are struggling to pay for your medications, contact your prescriber to discuss options for help.

# FAQs continued...

## Is therapy still important if I'm on medication for psychosis?

Medication is often most effective when combined with other treatments, including therapy, peer support, and lifestyle changes. Therapy can help you understand your symptoms, develop coping strategies, set goals for yourself, and improve your overall mental health.

## Can I stop taking my medication if I feel better?

It's important to never stop taking your medication abruptly without consulting your prescriber. Even if you're feeling better, the psychosis and related symptoms can return if you stop treatment and may even get worse. Your prescriber may work with you to gradually reduce the dose if appropriate.

## Will I need to take medication for the rest of my life?

Some individuals may be able to taper off medications under a prescriber's guidance. The duration of treatment depends on individual needs, the underlying cause of psychosis symptoms, and how well symptoms are managed. For many people who experience psychosis, medication is a long-term treatment to help prevent recurrence. Remember, your psychological wellbeing and quality of life are most important, rather than being on medication or not.

## What do I do if I'm struggling with my medication?

It is **normal** to feel overwhelmed, confused, or unsure about your medication. Here are a few ideas of things you can do:

1. Talk to your medical prescriber: If you're unsure whether the medication is working or if you're experiencing troubling side effects, your treatment team can help. They may adjust the dose, change your medication, or offer other solutions.
2. Keep a journal: It may be helpful to track how you're feeling, your symptoms, and any side effects. This can be useful for both you and your prescriber in monitoring progress and potential issues.
3. Stay connected: Keep in touch with your support network, which may include family, friends, or mental health professionals who can provide emotional support and encouragement.

## Final Thoughts

You are taking steps toward healing, and each day is progress. Taking medication for psychosis and related symptoms is an important step in managing your mental health. It might feel challenging at times, but these medications are intended to help you regain stability, reduce symptoms, and improve your overall quality of life. All treatment is centered around finding the right combination of strategies that work for you. It's a journey, and you don't have to navigate it alone. With the right plan, support, and time, you can work toward feeling better and living a fulfilling life.



# HeadsUp

Free early psychosis professional training, consultation services, general education & connection to care

HeadsUp is a collaborating organization whose **mission is to help end the stigma around psychosis through education, advocacy, and support.** We promote early intervention centered around personalized, accessible, and effective care for all people in Pennsylvania.

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