

NEUROSCIENCE TREATMENT TEAM PARTNER PROGRAM

Team Solutions

Understanding Your Treatment

How your medicine can help you feel better

By **Kay Johnson McCrary, EdD**

Peter J. Weiden, MD, Editor-in-Chief

Marcy Portnoff Gever, RPh, MEd, Educational Editor



Understanding Your Treatment

About the Author

Kay Johnson McCrary, EdD, has developed and taught patient and family education programs for the South Carolina Department of Mental Health since 1984. She is presently Director of Patient and Family Education at Bryan Psychiatric Hospital in Columbia, South Carolina.

Editor-in-Chief

Peter J. Weiden, MD, is Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Columbia University, and Director of the Neurobiologic Disorders Service at St. Luke's–Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. Dr. Weiden specializes in the public health aspects of medication treatment for people with schizophrenia.

Educational Editor

Marcy Portnoff Gever, RPh, MEd, is Medical Manager at Hastings Outcomes Management in Pennington, NJ, where she oversees the development of patient-directed programs dedicated to optimizing treatment outcomes. Ms. Gever specializes in patient education and is a columnist and author of numerous publications.

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Newer Treatments Are Helping People Feel Better

For many years, treatment for mental illnesses hadn't changed much. But recently, new discoveries about these illnesses have been made—and a lot more is now known about them. New medicines have been discovered. And people have more choices of treatments to help them feel better.

This workbook was written to help you understand your treatment. It focuses on the medicines used to manage your symptoms, what to expect from your medicine, and how to manage unwanted effects from your medicine should they occur.



At First, Most People Don't Know Why They're Not Feeling Right

Some mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, may not appear until people reach their teens or twenties. At first, most people can't understand why they're not feeling right. They don't know their symptoms are being caused by an underlying illness.

Without treatment, symptoms tend to get worse over time. Most people probably can't recall when they started to feel symptoms. Many don't remember when they started to have trouble concentrating on their work. Over several months or years, they may have felt worse but couldn't understand why they felt the way they did.

Most people aren't diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder until something serious happens. They may have a crisis situation—becoming a threat to themselves or to others. Or they may not be able to care for themselves. When they're admitted to the hospital, they discover they have an illness—and that treatment can help them feel better. Other people have a harder time accepting their illness—they may be hospitalized several times before they realize they have an illness and that they can help themselves feel better with treatment.



How Treatment Can Help

Medicine may help relieve symptoms such as anxiety, fears, suspicions, and sleeplessness. As your treatment continues, it may be easier for you to focus on your activities. You may feel less distracted by things happening around you. You may feel more relaxed and more open to working with your treatment team.

Many people have goals—they may want to be able to live on their own or go back to school or work. If these are things you want to do, your medicine can help you reach your goals by:

- Relieving symptoms you may be having
- Helping you feel more relaxed
- Improving your concentration



Have you ever been treated for a psychiatric illness? If so, describe your treatment on the lines below.

Did your treatment help you? If so, how did it help you?

Did you have any kind of problem with your last treatment? If so, what kind of problem did you have?

What Your Overall Treatment May Consist Of

Depending on your own needs, your overall treatment may involve some of the following:

- **One or more medicines**—to improve your concentration and relieve symptoms such as insomnia, nervousness, depression, fears, voices, feelings of suspicion, and confused thinking
- **Counseling sessions**—for emotional support on a regular basis; also to help you learn how to cope with problems caused by your illness, how to solve problems you are concerned about, and how to structure your time and activities
- **Psychoeducation**—to help you learn about your illness, how to manage it, how to recover, how to maintain recovery, and how to avoid relapse
- **Therapeutic recreation**—to help you learn how to keep stress at a comfortable level, communicate your thoughts more easily, enhance your friendships with others, and find activities you think you may enjoy in your free time
- **Rehabilitation**—to assist you in learning the skills you need to be successful in the living, working, and learning environments of your choice
- **Support groups**—to work with and learn from others who have similar problems; to give and receive support from others
- **Community resources**—to help you find community activities and resources that may be helpful to you



Your Treatment Plan



As part of your treatment, it's likely that you and your doctor will discuss your symptoms and medicines that can help. Then, your doctor will prescribe medicine for you. Medicines play several important roles. They can help in relieving your symptoms, can help you feel better, and can delay or prevent relapse (a recurrence of your symptoms).

Many people want to know more about their medicine and what results they can expect. They also want to know if they'll have any unwanted effects from their medicine. The rest of this workbook will focus on medicines—how they can help improve your symptoms, how they work, possible side effects, and how to manage your treatment. However, this workbook is not a complete discussion of all these issues. If you have questions about your medication or any unwanted effects, be sure to talk to your doctor.



What to Expect From Your Medicine

Your medicine is designed to help manage your symptoms and help you feel better. For example, you may have been bothered by anxieties, fears, insomnia, depression, and frightening sights, voices, sounds, thoughts, or beliefs. With medicine, these symptoms may become less frequent or less intense—they may disappear completely for some people. Your thinking may become clearer, so you can concentrate better. You may find it easier to be with other people.

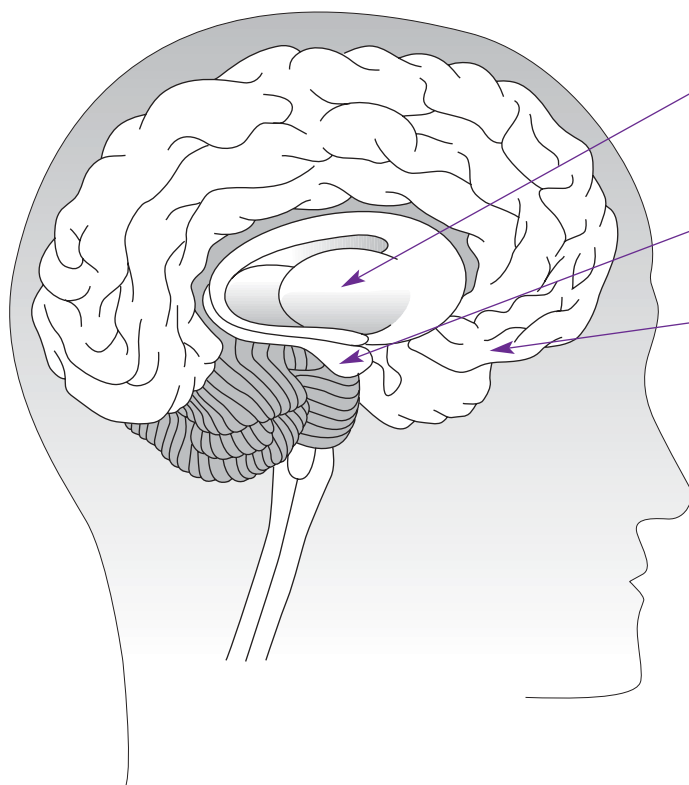
But all of this won't happen overnight. Treating symptoms such as these takes time. Your symptoms will probably improve gradually. It may take several weeks or months before you notice a difference in the way you feel. Give yourself time to feel better.

Then, once you feel better, keep taking your medicine. Continuing your treatment is the most important thing you can do to keep your symptoms from returning.



How Do Medicines Work to Relieve Your Symptoms?

Medicines work by adjusting the imbalance of chemicals in the brain. Brain chemicals are needed to carry messages from one brain nerve cell to the next so that you can:



- **Receive information from your senses** (what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel),
- **Process the information** (make sense of it), and
- **Make decisions based on the information you received and processed.**

When brain chemicals get out of balance, your brain receives only bits and pieces of information—like pieces of a puzzle. You have to struggle to fit those pieces together so that the message makes sense.

Messages Travel on Nerve Pathways

There are billions of nerve pathways in your brain. Information and messages travel on these nerve pathways to get to different areas of your brain. Each nerve pathway is made up of small brain nerve cells.

Brain Chemicals Carry Messages From One Nerve Cell to the Next

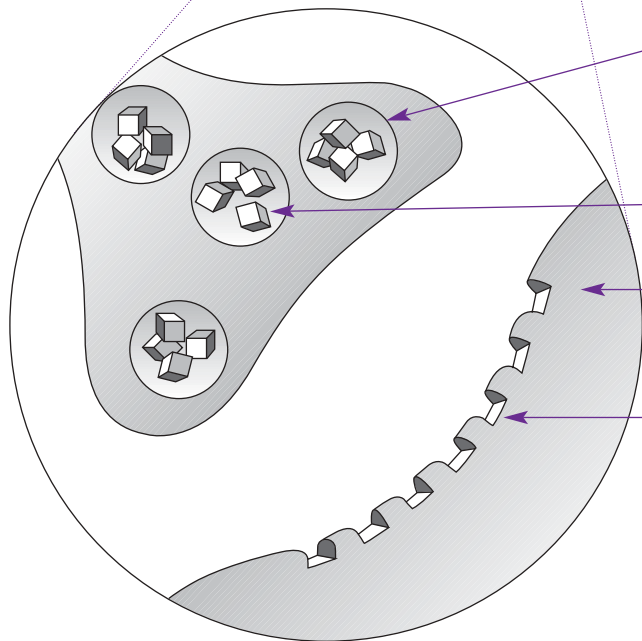
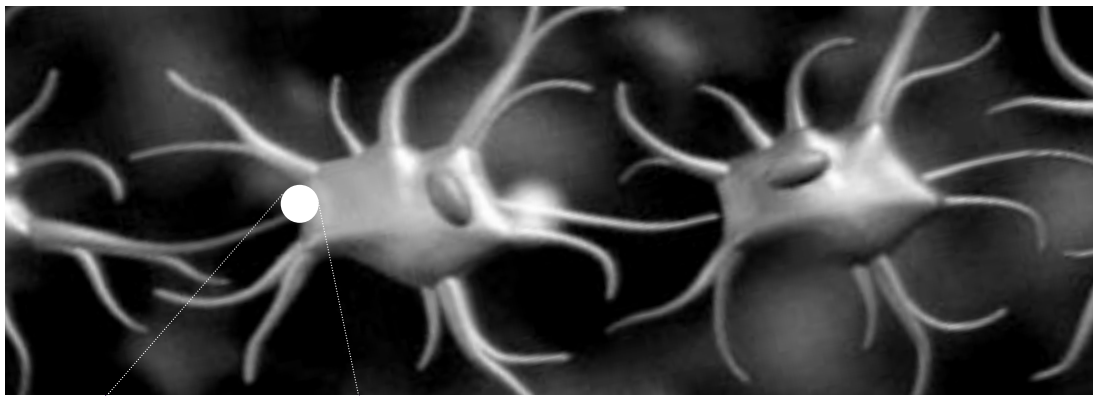
Nerve cells on a nerve pathway are lined up so that they can pass the message from one nerve cell to the next. But, nerve cells don't touch each other, so they can't pass the message directly. Brain chemicals are needed to help carry the message across the spaces between nerve cells. These brain chemicals are called *neurotransmitters*. They are stored in the vesicles of the nerve endings. When the brain chemicals are released from the nerve cell, they carry the message to the next nerve cell.

What Does It Mean?

Brain chemicals, known as **neurotransmitters**, are responsible for carrying information from one nerve cell to another nerve cell. "Neuro-" means nerve, and "-transmitters" refers to carrying messages. Neurotransmitters are stored in the synaptic vesicles—which are located in the nerve endings of the nerve cells.

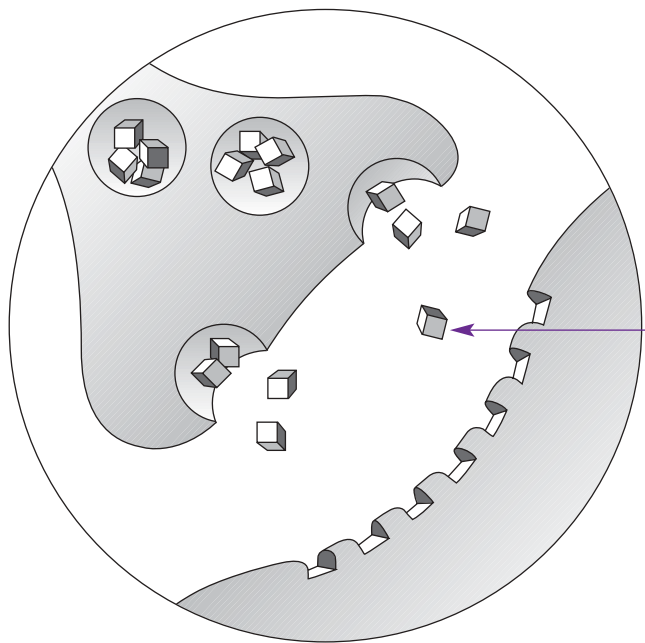
Messages Are Carried Along Pathways of Brain Nerve Cells

A pathway of brain nerve cells

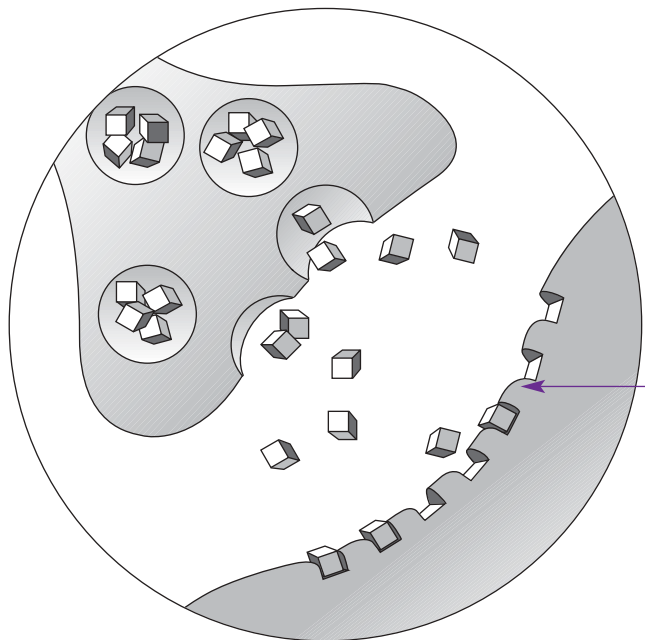


- *Brain chemicals are stored in the vesicles at the brain nerve cell endings, ready to carry a message.*
- *Brain chemicals.*
- *This brain nerve cell is ready to receive the message.*
- *“Receptors” are ready to receive the brain chemicals.*

How Messages Are Carried From One Brain Nerve Cell to Another



- *Brain chemicals leave their brain nerve cell ending to carry a message to the next brain nerve cell.*



- *The message is sent when brain chemicals connect with their receptors.*

When the Brain Chemicals Get Out of Balance

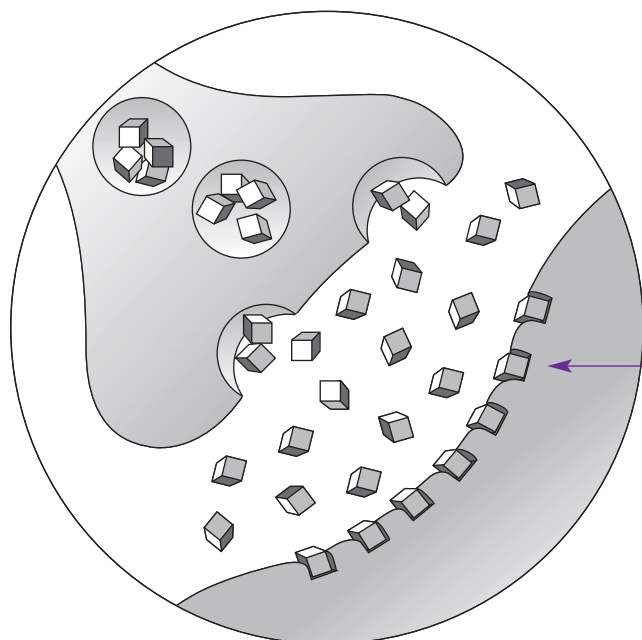
Nobody knows for certain, but it is thought that symptoms may occur when the brain chemicals get out of balance. There are many theories as to how this imbalance in brain chemicals may occur. Two of these theories are the following:

- **Too many brain chemicals may be released.**

Only a limited number of brain chemicals may be needed to carry the message to the next brain nerve cell. If too many brain chemicals are released, they may flood the nerve cell, which might interfere with the original message that was already sent.

- **The brain chemicals may stay too long at the next nerve cell and keep sending the message over and over again.**

Usually, brain chemicals carry a message to the next nerve cell, then send their message. Afterwards, they may go back to their own brain nerve cell for storage, or may get broken down and flushed into the blood stream and out of the body. If they don't go back to storage, or get broken down, they may stay in the space between the brain nerve cells and keep sending the message.



• *Too many brain chemicals flood the nerve cell with the message.*

When the brain chemicals get out of balance, you may feel unusual sensations such as hearing or seeing things that are not really there. These sensations can interfere with the message that's supposed to get through. The real message may get broken up—and you may not receive the entire message. The message may not make sense, so you may feel confused and nervous.

You may also feel exhausted because you've had to struggle to block out the other sensations so that you could understand the real message. In addition, your thoughts may seem "speeded up." They may be misleading and you may feel too overwhelmed to get out of bed some mornings.

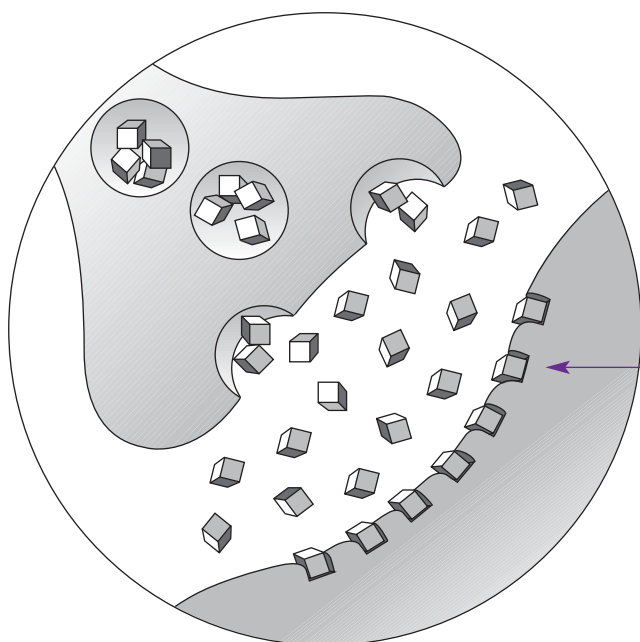


How Your Medicine Works

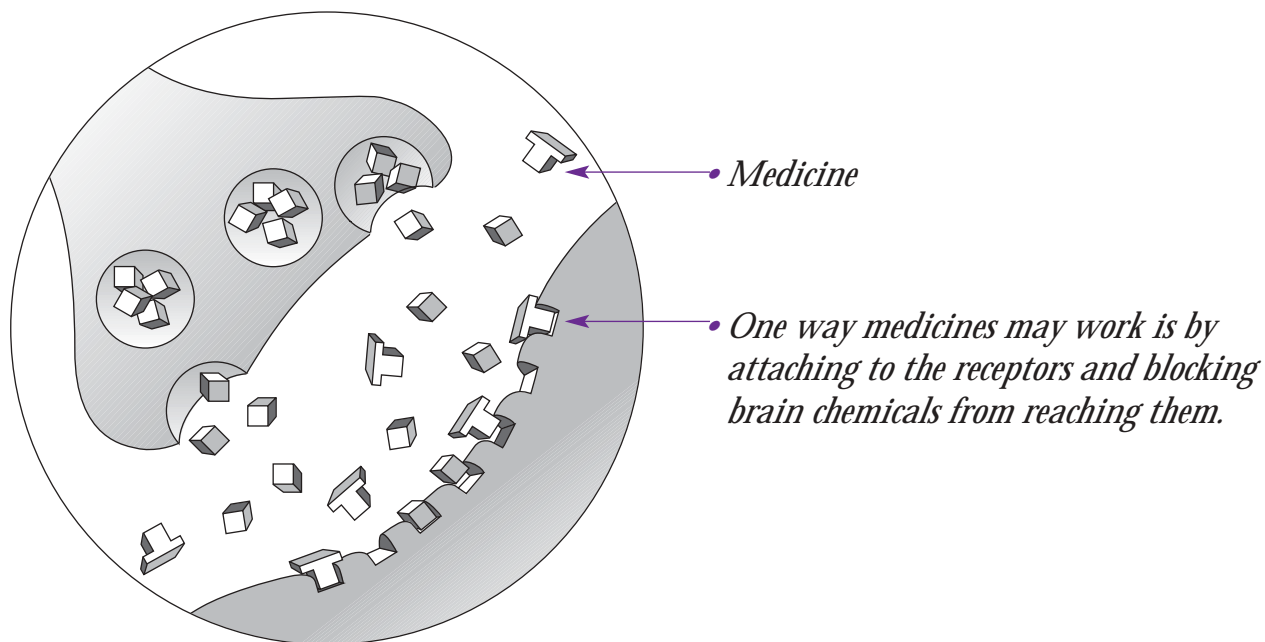
There are many different medicines available to treat symptoms of mental illness. Why do we need so many to choose from? Because different medicines work in different ways to adjust the brain chemicals and relieve your symptoms. That's why if one medicine doesn't work for you, another medicine might work better. Some people may need more than one type of medicine to get relief from their symptoms. The important thing is to work with your doctor to find the medicine and dosage that's best for you.

There are several ways medicines may work to help relieve symptoms. One way may be to block excess brain chemicals from connecting with the next brain nerve cell. When the brain chemicals are blocked, they can't send their messages.

Another way medicines may help is by sending the brain chemicals back to their own brain nerve cells once they've finished relaying their messages. In general, medicines may help by adjusting the balance of brain chemicals—which is thought to be related to improved symptoms. However, it takes time for the balance of brain chemicals to change, so it may take several weeks before you notice a difference in your symptoms.



• *Too many brain chemicals flood the nerve cell with the message.*



What Would Happen If You Stopped Taking Your Medicine?

With every dose, your medicine works to improve your symptoms and help prevent your symptoms from returning. So, if you stop taking your medicine, your symptoms are very likely to return. You may have a relapse and might have to go to the hospital.

Your medicine cannot *cure* the problem that's *causing* the imbalance. Your medicine can only help to adjust the imbalance while it's in your system. That's why you have to continue taking your medicine every day, as long as your doctor recommends it. Remember, if you have any questions about your medication or possible unwanted effects, always discuss them with your doctor.

About Your Medicines



Your doctor may have told you to take your medicine a certain way, such as “at bedtime.” It’s important to follow your doctor’s instructions exactly, to get the best results from your treatment. Here’s why:

- For your medicine to work the right way, there must be enough of it in your system. If your dosage is too low, or if you miss doses, there may not be enough medicine to keep the brain chemicals balanced. Your symptoms may not improve. Or, if they have improved and you stop your medicine, your symptoms could come back again or get worse.
- If your dosage is too high, you may get more unwanted effects from your medicine. (But some unwanted effects can happen even at the right dosage.)
- Some nonprescription medicines can interfere with the medicine(s) you’re taking. Some can make your illness worse. If you need to take a medicine for another health problem such as a cold, talk to your doctor or pharmacist first. Your doctor or pharmacist can help you find a medicine that won’t interfere with your condition or other medicines.



Medicine(s) You're Taking at This Time

Which medicine(s) are you now taking regularly to manage your symptoms? On the spaces below, write the name of your medicine(s), the dose(s), and when you take each one:



Name of medicine: _____

Dosage: _____

When you take it: _____

Name of medicine: _____

Dosage: _____

When you take it: _____

Name of medicine: _____

Dosage: _____

When you take it: _____

Name of medicine: _____

Dosage: _____

When you take it: _____



How long ago did you start this treatment?



**Have your symptoms changed since you started this treatment?
If so, how have they changed?**



Have you had any new symptoms since you started your medicine?

Yes No

If you answered “Yes,” what new symptoms have you had?



**If you have had new symptoms since you started this treatment,
have you told your doctor about the symptoms?**

Yes No

If you answered “Yes,” what did you and your doctor decide to do?

Knowing About Your Medicine's *Unwanted* Effects

When people use the term “side effects,” they usually mean a drug’s *unwanted* effects. Many side effects can be annoying but may not be serious. There are ways to handle these side effects so they don’t bother you as much. Other side effects can be more serious—you should call your doctor right away if a serious side effect happens to you.

Is Your Medicine Likely to Cause Side Effects?



People often wonder if they’ll have side effects from their medicine. Some people may have a few side effects from their medicine. Others may not have any side effects at all, even if they are taking the same medicine in the same dosage. That’s because medicines affect people in different ways.

The kind of reaction you may have to your medicine depends on many things—your age, sex, weight, and the way the medicine is broken down in your body. Also, the amount of medicine you’re taking (your dosage) and other medicines you’re taking can affect the way you react to your medicine.

Your doctor may order lab tests for you (such as blood tests, an EKG, etc.) to screen for side effects you may not be aware of. If you think you may be having a side effect from your medicine, tell your doctor. In some cases, a change in your dosage can reduce side effects. Sometimes doctors may prescribe an additional medicine to offset certain side effects. Do not try to make these changes yourself. Only your doctor is trained to find the treatment that’s right for you.



Possible Side Effects of Your Medicine

You may not get any side effects from your medicine. But it's good to be aware of those that can happen. That way, you'll be able to recognize if a symptom you're having *is* a side effect—and know how to manage it. Listed below are some possible side effects that may be associated with treatments for mental illness. Check off the ones that have bothered you during the past month.

Mouth



- Dry mouth
- Drooling
- Unusual involuntary movements of the tongue and mouth (tardive dyskinesia)

Skin

- Skin rash
- Increased sensitivity to the sun (sunburn)

Muscle/Nervous System

- Tremors or shaking
- Muscle stiffness
- Muscle spasms
- Unusual involuntary movements of the hands, fingers, feet, or toes (tardive dyskinesia)
- Being forced to look upward
- Neck spasms
- Difficulty walking as usual



General

- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Having a feeling of restlessness (akathisia)
- Feeling slowed down (akinesia)

Changes in Sexual Function

- Less sexual desire (men and women)
- Difficulty having orgasm (men and women)
- Difficulty with erections or ejaculating (men)
- Leaking of milk from breasts (women)
- Missed menstrual periods (women)

Other

- Blurry vision
- Constipation
- Difficulty urinating
- Weight gain



Have you had any other side effects during the past month?

If so, list them below:

Have you and your doctor discussed ways to manage the side effect(s)?

How to Manage Side Effects That May Be Bothering You

Many side effects may be annoying but are not serious. Suggestions on how to handle these kinds of side effects are featured on the next few pages. Sometimes, people think they should stop their medicine if they get a side effect. This is not true in many cases. Always talk to your doctor if you think you're having side effects with your medicine.

Some side effects are rare but can be serious (see page 26). It's important to get medical help if any of these side effects should happen to you. If you think you may be having a side effect that was not mentioned in the list on pages 20 and 21, contact your doctor as soon as possible.

Blurry Vision

If your vision is blurred, contact your doctor right away. Your doctor may want to adjust your dosage or give you another medicine to correct the problem.

Constipation

Some people may have fewer bowel movements or have hard stools. If this is uncomfortable for you, tell your doctor. Your doctor might suggest drinking plenty of fluids (6 to 8 cups of water daily), eating more of certain foods (such as bran cereals, fruits, and vegetables), or taking a separate medicine to relieve this problem.

Dizziness

If you are lying on your bed or the couch and you sit up or stand up too quickly, you may become very dizzy. To prevent dizziness, rise slowly. If you are lying on your bed, first put your feet over the edge of the bed, then sit up slowly. Wait a moment before standing up. This side effect usually improves as you continue with your treatment.

Drowsiness

Your medicine may make you feel drowsy—you may want to see how your medicine affects you before you do any activity that requires you to be alert. You might want to start your medicine on a day that you're going to be at home, just to see how you react to it. This side effect is usually temporary, so you are likely to feel less drowsy as you continue your treatment with your medicine.

Dry Mouth

If your mouth feels dry, suck on sugar-free, hard, sour candy. Many people find this can help relieve the dryness. Chewing sugarless gum or sipping water may also help.

Restlessness

You may feel like you have to keep moving—it's hard to sit still. This side effect is called “akathisia.” It can be managed with other medicines. So be sure to tell your doctor if this side effect is bothering you.

Sexual Difficulties

Some people may have less sexual desire and fewer orgasms. Some men may have difficulty with erections or ejaculation; some women may experience missed menstrual periods or leakage of breast milk. If you think you may be having any of these side effects, tell your doctor. Your doctor may want to adjust your dosage or change your medicine. Do not make any changes on your own.



Skin Rash

Skin rash can happen while taking any medicine. It may be caused by an allergy you may have to the medicine. If you get a skin rash, call your doctor immediately. Your doctor may want to change your medicine.

Slowed Body Movements

People who have this side effect may feel a tightness in their muscles. They may have a tremor in their hands or walk slowly. They may walk with very short steps and may not have much of an arm swing. If you feel any of these symptoms, tell your doctor. Your doctor may want to adjust your medicine dosage. Or, your doctor may prescribe another medicine to manage these side effects. Do not make any changes on your own.

Feeling Slowed Down

Some people describe this side effect as “feeling like a zombie.” If this side effect happens to you, tell your doctor. Your doctor may want to adjust your dosage or prescribe another medicine to relieve this side effect. Do not make any changes on your own.

Sunburn

Some medicines can make you more sensitive to the sun. Ask your doctor if this is a side effect of your medicine. If so, stay in the shade when you go outdoors. Also, use clothing or a sunscreen to protect skin that’s not covered—even if you plan to stay in the shade.



Difficulty Urinating

You may have the urge to urinate but may not be able to empty your bladder completely. You may be able to void only small amounts of urine at a time, so you may have urges to urinate more often than usual. If you have difficulty urinating, call your doctor as soon as possible.

Weight Gain

Some people may gain weight after several weeks or months of treatment. Some medicines can cause an increase in appetite. If you start to gain weight, ask your doctor to recommend a balanced, low-calorie diet that will provide good nutrition. Also, exercise regularly to prevent yourself from gaining weight. Walking at a fast pace for 30 minutes, three times a week may be enough to keep your weight stable—and may help you feel better too! Be sure to talk to your doctor before beginning an exercise program.



Serious Side Effects

The side effects discussed in this section can be serious, but occur at different rates with various medicines and in different people. Although these side effects rarely occur, it's important to be familiar with them so that you'll know what to do if you experience a serious side effect.

If you've ever had any of these side effects, be sure to tell your doctor and the other members of your treatment team. Also keep in mind that your medicine may not cause all of the side effects listed in this section. Check with your doctor to find out which side effects may occur with the medicine you're taking.

Low White Blood Cell Count (Agranulocytosis)

"Agranulocytosis" is a rare but serious side effect. Agranulocytosis means "low white blood cell count." White blood cells help fight infection. And without enough white blood cells, your body may not be able to fight infection. This side effect can be dangerous, so you may be asked to get blood tests regularly just to make sure your white blood cell count is within the right range. Be sure to report high fevers and painful sore throats to your doctor as soon as possible.

Involuntary Muscle Movements

This side effect usually occurs after months or years of taking the medicine. It is serious and can still occur even after the medicine is stopped. It's called "tardive dyskinesia." It can cause involuntary movements of the tongue and mouth, such as chewing or sucking motions, lip smacking, and puckering of the cheeks. Sometimes, the arms and legs can be affected. If you have any of these side effects, tell your doctor.

Overheating (Hyperthermia)

Some medicines can cause you to get overheated, especially in hot weather and when you're exercising. Drinking plenty of water (about four to eight cups each day) can help you avoid getting overheated. Stay in the shade if possible, and if you exercise, take frequent breaks.

Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome

This side effect is rare but very serious. Muscles get very stiff over one to three days and you may feel very confused. A high fever develops. If you start to feel these symptoms, get medical help *immediately*. Go to the emergency room if you cannot reach your doctor.

Seizures

Some medicines make people more prone to having seizures. This is especially true for people who have seizure problems and those who are taking certain other medicines. If you have a seizure, get medical help *immediately*.

Uncontrollable Muscle Spasms (Dystonia)

Also referred to as a “dystonic reaction,” this side effect feels like a charley horse or writer’s cramp. It may start with a neck spasm that leads to a stiff neck and stiff tongue. The eye muscles may also be involved—the eyes may roll up and back. This reaction can be relieved within minutes with another medicine. If this side effect happens to you, call your doctor *immediately* or go to the emergency room. Your doctor may want to prescribe another medicine to prevent this reaction from happening again.



A Word About Drug Interactions

One of the most dangerous things that can happen with medicines is when you take two or more drugs at the same time, and you have a bad reaction. There's no need to worry about this if you are just taking the medicines your doctor prescribed—the way your doctor prescribed them. But problems can occur when people start taking medicines their doctors *didn't* prescribe. If you are getting prescription medicines from more than one doctor (such as your psychiatrist and family doctor), be sure to tell each doctor about all of the medicines you are taking.

Some drugs you can buy without a prescription can *interact* with your medicine. They can affect the way your medicine works. This can happen even with mild drugs—those you buy in the supermarket, such as decongestants and diet aids. Be sure to talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking any other drugs with the medicines your doctor prescribed for you.

Drug Interactions With Alcohol and Street Drugs



Alcohol and street drugs are especially dangerous when combined with your medicine. They not only block the way your medicine works but can cause bad side effects:

- Extreme drowsiness; lethargy
- Tremors, spasms, and involuntary muscle movements
- Very low blood pressure leading to dizziness and fainting
- Return of your symptoms (because alcohol and street drugs can stop your medicine from working)

Make the commitment to get better—avoid alcohol and street drugs!

Test Yourself: How Much Do You Know About Your Medicine?



See how much you know about your medicine. Read each statement and decide whether it is true or false. Circle your answer. Then read the answer after the statement to see if you're right.

1. **True or False:** If you were taking a medicine in the past, and it didn't help your symptoms, nothing else can be done.

Answer: False. Many drugs are available, and research is being conducted all of the time. People respond differently to various drugs. Your doctor may be able to suggest another medicine that may help you.



2. **True or False:** People who stop their medicine often end up back in the hospital.

Answer: True. Unfortunately, this happens quite often. People who recover and even go back to work may think they've recovered completely, and they stop taking their medicine. Slowly, their symptoms return, but they don't notice their symptoms in time. They become very ill and once again must return to the hospital. You're much less likely to relapse when you take your medicine every day.





3. **True or False:** It's not necessary to take your medicine if you are taking vitamins or seeing a therapist for psychotherapy, such as "talk therapy."

Answer: False. Even if you are taking vitamins or seeing a therapist for talk therapy, you still need to take your medicine every day. Without your medicine, the brain chemicals may get out of balance. And your symptoms will probably return within a few weeks.

4. **True or False:** Even if you take your medicine every day, you might still have symptoms.

Answer: True. You may have some symptoms that just won't disappear, even if you take your medicine the right way. Sometimes you may need to be hospitalized even though you've taken your medicine correctly. Although this is disappointing, you should know that your symptoms would have been more severe if you had not taken your medicine. If this has happened to you, talk to your doctor about using a different medicine.

If you are having symptoms that haven't gone away, be sure to tell your doctor about them. There may be other ways to manage these symptoms—options you and your doctor may not have considered yet.



Finding the Treatment and Dosage That's Best for You

Many medicines used to treat mental illness are similar to each other. They work in similar ways. However, each person may react differently to different medicines. One medicine may work better for your symptoms than another. And, one medicine may cause fewer side effects for you compared to other medicines you've tried in the past.

Work with your doctor—tell your doctor if you're feeling better, or having a problem with your medicine. Together, you and your doctor can make the best possible decisions about your treatment—so you can feel your best.

