

Medication

Choice and managing problems

Your doctor may offer you medication if you have a mental illness. Sometimes you might not want to take medication or feel it is not right for you. This factsheet has some suggestions about you can try and deal with problems with medication.

In this factsheet, the word 'doctor' means psychiatrists and general practitioners (GPs).



KEY POINTS

- Your doctor may offer you medication to help with symptoms of a mental illness.
- Medication is not the only treatment you can get. You may find talking therapies, self-help and complementary and alternative therapies useful too.
- You might have to try different medicines before you find the one that is right for you.
- Your doctor should tell you any risks and benefits of taking medication before you start taking it.
- You may get side effects from your medication. It is important that you find the balance between treating your symptoms and managing side effects.
- If you have a problem with your medication, talk to your doctor about it. You can bring a friend, relative or advocate if you find it hard to talk to your doctor.

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1. What are the different types of medication?

If you have a mental illness, your doctor may offer you medication to help with your symptoms.

You can take medication by mouth as a tablet or liquid. You can also get medication as an injection which is called a 'depot' (pronounced "deh-poh"). If you are given medication as a depot it stays in your system for longer. Depot injections can be helpful if you have problems remembering to take your medication.

Go to www.rethink.org for specific information about:

- Antidepressants
- Antipsychotics
- Mood stabilisers
- Benzodiazepines

Go to our Further Reading section to see how you can access our factsheets.

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2. How does my doctor decide what medication to give me?

Your doctor uses different information to decide which medication to give you and how much you should take. This may include:¹

- guidance produced by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)
- what medication works for your condition
- any medication you have tried before
- your physical health
- how much you smoke, drink alcohol or take recreational drugs

- the effect it might have with other medication you take
- any side effects linked to the medication
- if you would prefer a particular medication

Your doctor might suggest a certain type of medication because they know more about it than other treatments. However, they should not pressure you to take a drug or treatment.² The General Medical Council (GMC) says that doctors should be open and honest about why they have made a decision. If you don't agree with your doctor they should listen to your concerns and suggestions you make.³ You should be able to ask your doctor about medication you want to try. Your doctor should also talk to you about other treatments such as talking therapies.

You can find more information about '**Talking therapies**' at www.rethink.org. Go to our Further Readings section to see how you can access this factsheet.

You might worry that your doctor will make you go to hospital if you do not take the medication they suggest. Your doctor cannot threaten to section you under the Mental Health Act (MHA) 1983 if you don't accept a type of treatment.⁴ Your doctor can only do this if you refuse treatment and your illness puts you or others at risk of serious harm.

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3. What should my doctor tell me before I take my medication?

Your doctor has to make sure:

- your care is their first concern
- you agree to treatment.⁵

To make sure they do this, your doctor should:

- explain the benefits and risks of taking a medication
- tell you why they are giving you a medication
- tell you what the side effects are.⁶

You will also get an information leaflet with your medication. This will give information on things like dosage, common side effects and special warnings.

You may get side effects from your medication, and your doctor should give you an overview of what these might be. We talk about side effects in more detail in [section 5](#).

Your doctor should make sure you understand the information they have given you. They should ask if you have any questions and answer these honestly.

Your doctor doesn't have to give you some information if there is a risk of serious harm to you. Serious harm means more than just a risk of you

refusing treatment. It is unusual for doctors to withhold information for this reason.⁷ If your doctor does withhold information from you they should explain why in your medical notes.

If you want to talk to your doctor about your medication you can do this any time. You can write a list of questions to ask before your appointment. There are some examples of questions at the end of this factsheet.

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4. How long does medication take to work?

Medication can take a while to work. You may see an effect within a few weeks of treatment⁸, but you should wait four to six weeks to see if it works for you.

If you don't think your medication is working you should talk to your doctor. Your doctor can decide if you need to change the dose or medication. If you feel there are urgent reasons why you need to stop your medication, tell your doctor about these. You have the right to ask questions and choose your medication based on what you think is right for you.

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5. Are there any side effects?

When you take any medication you can get side effects. These can sometimes be unpleasant. Your doctor should always tell you the common side effects. Side effects can go away after a few weeks to months of taking medication. You may want to find the right balance between medication that helps your symptoms and has the least side effects.

If you feel the side effects are very bad, the first thing to do is talk to your doctor. They might change your dose or suggest a different medication. They may also be able to give you other drugs to help with the side effects.

If your doctor offers you other medication, you may find these also have side effects, and may not help with your symptoms. You can use a scale like the Glasgow Antipsychotic Side Effects Scale⁹ to monitor your side effects.

The Glasgow Antipsychotic Side Effects Scale (GASS) is a questionnaire you can do by yourself. There are 22 questions about different side effects. You can bring this to your doctor to help you decide how to manage the side effects. You can download the GASS here:

www.reach4resource.co.uk/sites/default/files/Scale.pdf.

There are some common side effects with certain medications. You may be able to make lifestyle changes which help relieve some side effects. Here we give some suggestions of ways you could try to manage these side effects.¹⁰ You should always talk to your doctor before you make any changes.

Feeling tired or sleepy

Taking your medication at night might make you feel less tired during the day. Split your medication throughout the day, taking more in the evening. Make sure that you are taking the right amount, and that you aren't taking more than you need to. You might feel more tired when you first start taking the medication.

Sexual side effects

Sexual side effects can include:

- sexual dysfunction (for example, problems reaching orgasm or getting an erection)
- producing breast milk
- your periods stopping, and
- growing more breast tissue, if you are a man.

Medication, physical health problems or psychological issues can also cause sexual problems.

You might find sexual side effects embarrassing to talk about, however doctors will have talked to other patients about this sort of problem many times before. Your doctor should be able to find out what may be causing your sexual problems and suggest ways to make things better.

Weight gain

Some medication can make you feel hungry and put on weight. You should try to eat a healthy, balanced diet with high fibre, vegetables and complex carbohydrates. Staying away from sugary drinks and snacks can also help keep your weight down. Try and fit exercise into your routine in a way that you enjoy it. Making sure you have a proper sleeping pattern can also help. Your doctor can give you advice on how to stay healthy.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance says that people with psychosis and schizophrenia should have a physical health check every year.¹¹

You can find more information on this and general information on lifestyle in our '**Good Health Guide**', which you can download for free from www.rethink.org.

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6. What if I want to stop taking my medication?

You should talk to your doctor if you want to stop taking medication. You can get withdrawal effects when you stop taking medication, especially if you've been taking the medication for a long time. Your doctor might tell you to gradually stop taking your medication over a few weeks or months. If you get serious side effects tell your doctor as soon as possible.

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7. How can I talk to my doctor about my medication?

If you have questions about your medication, you should make an appointment with doctor. You can prepare for your appointment by making a list of questions and any concerns you have. You can bring someone to the appointment with you such as a carer, friend, relative or advocate for support if you like. We have listed some suggestions about questions you can ask at the end of this factsheet.

You can find more information about ‘**Advocacy**’ at www.rethink.org. Go to our Further Reading section to see how you can access our factsheets.

What can I do if my doctor won’t listen to me?

If you disagree with your doctor, talk to them about why you disagree and what you might prefer instead. Find out why the doctor has made their decision and if they will change their mind. If they won’t change their decision, find out why.

You can write to your doctor asking them to listen to your concerns. You can explain that governing bodies such as the General Medical Council (GMC) or the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) suggest they should listen to your concerns.

You could look into getting a second opinion. A second opinion is when another doctor gives you an opinion about your diagnosis or treatment. You do not have a legal right to a second opinion it can be help if there questions or problems with your treatment.

If you feel your relationship with your doctor is not working or if you are still not happy, you can think about making a complaint. If you want to complain about an NHS doctor or service you have to use the NHS complaints process.

You can find more information about

- Second opinions
- Complaints

at www.rethink.org. Or go to our Further Reading section to see how you can access these factsheets.

What can I do if my doctor treats me unfairly?

If you think your doctor’s behaviour is unprofessional you can report them to their governing body, the General Medical Council (GMC). Unprofessional behaviour might be committing a crime, making serious mistakes or lying. You should not report your doctor to the GMC to solve a disagreement about medication.

You can take legal action if you feel:

- you have suffered loss because your doctor has given you a certain medication

- your doctor has given you medication that other doctors would not.

You can find out more information about

- Clinical Negligence
- How to get Legal Advice and Assistance

at www.rethink.org. Or go to our Further Reading section and see how you can access our factsheets.

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8. Do I have to take medication?

You do not have to take medication if you don't want to. You have to agree to treatment. To make decisions about treatment you have to:

- make the decision without being pressured by family, friends or health professionals
- understand the treatment including the benefits, risks, other treatment and what happens if you don't take it.

Can I refuse medication if I am in hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983?

When you are in hospital on a section of the Mental Health Act 1983 (MHA), doctors can give you medication even if you don't agree to it. Your doctor should still ask if you will accept treatment before they give it to you.¹² Your doctor should ask you questions and look at your medical notes so that you get the right medication.

If you don't want to take medication you can try some of the suggestions in this factsheet. You can get an Independent Mental Health Advocate (IMHA) when you are in hospital. An IMHA can go to meetings with your doctor. Your friends and family can also come to meetings with you if you want them involved with your care.

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Some examples of questions you can ask your doctor

- What is my diagnosis?
- Can you explain my diagnosis to me?
- How does the medication work?
- Why did you choose this medication?
- What is the usual dose of this medication?
- What symptoms should this medication help?
- Are there any treatments apart from medication?
- What are the side effects? Will they be short-term or long-term?
- What are the chances of getting side effects such as weight gain or sexual side effects?

- Are there any other medications that I could try instead if I wanted to?
- How long will it take to work?
- How long will I have to take it for?
- Can I get a repeat prescription?
- What should I do if it doesn't work?
- What should I do if I get bad side-effects?
- Who will review my medication and how often?
- Can I drink / smoke when taking this medication?
- Will the medication affect any other drugs or herbal remedies I am taking?
- Can I drive while taking this medication?



You can find more information in the following factsheets:

- Antidepressants
- Antipsychotics
- Mood stabilisers
- Benzodiazepines
- Talking therapies
- Advocacy
- Second opinions
- Complaints
- Clinical Negligence
- How to get Legal Advice and Assistance

at www.rethink.org. Or call our Support Care Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of the factsheet. For advice, call 0300 5000 927.



VoiceAbility

An advocacy service who work across England. They have Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy and NHS Complaints advocacy services. You can find your local service on their website.

Address: VoiceAbility, Mount Pleasant House, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 0RN

Website: www.voiceability.org/contact_us/

POhWER

Have independent advocacy services across England including advice and information, NHS complaints, IMHA, IMCA and community advocacy.

Telephone: 0300 456 2370

Address: PO Box 14043, Birmingham, B6 9BL

Email: pohwer@pohwer.net

Website: www.pohwer.net/

Electronic Medicines Compendium UK

The EMC has information about medications. You can look up the 'Patient Information Leaflet' (PILs) and the 'Summary of Product Characteristics' (SPCs) for your medication.

Website: www.medicines.org.uk/emc/



- ¹ General Medical Council '*Good practice in prescribing and managing medicines and devices*' 2013. para 21-29
- ² General Medical Council '*Consent guidance: Ensuring that decisions are voluntary*' 2013. para 41-42
- ³ See reference 1 at para 10-12
- ⁴ Department of Health. *Code of Practice Mental Health Act 1983*. London: TSO; 2008 para 4.12
- ⁵ General Medical Council '*Good medical practice*' 2013 The duties of a doctor registered with the General Medical Council.
- ⁶ See reference 1, para 32
- ⁷ See reference 1, para 16
- ⁸ Taylor, D. Paton, C. & Kapur, S. *The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines in Psychiatry*. 11th edition. Wiley Blackwell. 2012 at pgs 38-39, 198-199
- ⁹ Waddel, L. & Taylor, M. *Glasgow ntipsychotic side-effect scale*. 2014. Available from: <http://mentalhealthpartnerships.com/resource/glasgow-antipsychotic-side-effect-scale/> [Accessed: November 2014]
- ¹⁰ Humber NHS Foundation Trust. *Guidelines for the Medicines Management of Antipsychotics* 2013. Available from: www.hey.nhs.uk/herpc/guidelines/antipsychotics.pdf [Accessed November 2014]
- ¹¹ NICE Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults: Treatment and management (2014). Available from: www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/CG178 [Accessed October 2014]
- ¹² See reference 2, para 23.37

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Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

**Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)**

Email advice@rethink.org

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Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS

PO Box 17106

Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm

Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



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Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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