



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 explains how you can try and deal with problems with medication.



- Your doctor may offer you medication to help with symptoms of a mental illness.
- Medication is not the only treatment that might be right for you. You may find talking therapies, self-help and alternative therapies useful too.
- You might have to try different medicines before you find the one that works for you.
- Your doctor should tell you any risks and benefits of taking medication before you start taking it. They should also tell you how to take it.
- You may get side effects from your medication. Many will wear off over time. 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 should speak to your doctor before stopping medication.
- You can take a friend, relative or advocate if you find it hard to talk to your doctor.

This factsheet covers:

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

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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. This is called a 'depot' (pronounced "dehpoh"). If you are given medication as a depot it can help keep the medication in your system for longer. Depot injections can help you remember your medication.

You can find more information about:

- Antidepressants
- Antipsychotics
- Mood stabilisers
- Benzodiazepines

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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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. They might look at:¹

- guidance produced by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE),
- any medication that helped you before,
- your physical health,
- if you smoke, drink alcohol or take recreational drugs,

- the effect it might have when taken with other medication,
- any side effects linked to the medication, or
- if you want to take a particular medication.

Your doctor might suggest a certain type of medication because they know more about it than other treatments. But 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.³ If you don't agree with your doctor then explain why you don't agree. They should listen to your concerns and any suggestions you make.⁴ For example, they should listen to you if you want to try a particular medication. 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. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our 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 detain you under the Mental Health Act (MHA) 1983 if you don't accept a type of treatment.⁵ Your doctor can only detain you under the Act if:

- you refuse treatment, and
- your illness puts you or others at risk of serious harm.

You can find more information about the '**Mental Health Act**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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

Your doctor has to make sure:⁶

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

To make sure they do this, your doctor should:⁷

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

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

You may get side effects from your medication. 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.⁸ They should ask if you have any questions and answer these honestly.⁹

Your doctor doesn't have to give you information if they think it could cause you serious harm. Serious harm means more than just a risk of you refusing treatment. It is unusual for doctors to withhold information for this reason.¹⁰ 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 could write a list of your questions before your appointment. There are some examples of questions at the end of this factsheet.

If you research medication on the internet you should only use reliable sources. You can download copies of Patient Information Leaflets from The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency website by using this link:

www.mhra.gov.uk/spc-pil/index.htm;

You can also go to your pharmacist for a Medicines Use Review (MUR). This is a free service. In an MUR you can speak to a pharmacist about all the medications you are taking. They can explain what your medications are for. They can also tell you about any potential side effects.¹¹

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4. How long does medication take to work?

Medication can take a while to work. For example, some antidepressants can work straight away. Or they might take a few weeks.¹²

If you don't think your medication is working you should talk to your doctor. You should not stop taking your medication without speaking to your doctor first. 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.^{13,14}

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5. Are there any side effects?

When you take any medication you might get side effects. These can sometimes be unpleasant. Your doctor should always tell you the common side effects.¹⁵ Side effects can go away after a few weeks or months of taking medication. It is important that you 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.

You can use a scale like the Glasgow Antipsychotic Side Effects Scale to monitor your side effects.¹⁶

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 take this to your doctor to help you decide how to manage the side effects. You can download the GASS here:

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Taylor%20handout,%20GASS%20scale%20%20instructions.pdf>;

In some cases you might be able to lessen side effects through changes to your lifestyle. Here are some suggestions you could try.¹⁷ You should always talk to your doctor before you make any changes.

Feeling tired or sleepy

You should always take your medication at the time of day your doctor said. If you are not sure you can ask your doctor. Or it might tell you when to take the medication on the label. Your medication might make you feel more tired or sleepy. 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 the following.

- Sexual dysfunction, such as problems reaching orgasm or getting an erection
- Producing breast milk
- Your periods stopping
- Growing more breast tissue, if you are a man

You might find sexual side effects embarrassing to talk about. But 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. They can 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,
- stay away from or limit sugary drinks and snacks,
- fit exercise into your routine in a way that you enjoy it, and
- make sure you have a proper sleeping pattern.

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.¹⁸

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. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of the guide.

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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.¹⁹ This can often happen 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 your doctor. You can prepare for your appointment by making a list of questions and any concerns you have. You can take someone to the appointment with you for support. This could be a carer, friend, relative or advocate. We have given some questions you could ask at the end of this factsheet.

You can find more information about '**Advocacy**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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 the General Medical Council (GMC) and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) suggest they should listen to your concerns.²⁰

You could try to get 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. But it can be helpful if there are 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 make 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 call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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 might be able to take legal action for clinical negligence if you feel:

- you have suffered harm because your doctor has given you a certain medication, or
- your doctor has given you the wrong medication and it had a bad effect on you.

You can find out more information about:

- Clinical Negligence
- Legal Advice

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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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 professionals²¹, and
- understand the treatment including the benefits, risks, other treatment and what happens if you don't take it.²²

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

When you are detained under 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.²³ 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 help you in meetings with your doctor. Your friends and family can also come to meetings with you if you want them involved with your care.

You can find more information about the 'Mental Health Act' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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Some questions you could ask your doctor

- What is my diagnosis? Can you explain it to me?
- How does the medication work?
- Why did you choose this medication?
- What is the usual dose of this medication?
- What time of day should I take my 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?

**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*. London: General Medical Council; 2013. Para 21-29.
- ² General Medical Council. *Consent guidance: Ensuring that decisions are voluntary*. London: General Medical Council; 2013. Para 41-42.
- ³ General Medical Council. *Good medical practice*. London: General Medical Council; 2013. Para 68.
- ⁴ As note 1, at para 25.
- ⁵ Department of Health. *Code of Practice Mental Health Act 1983*. London: TSO; 2015. Para 14.17.
- ⁶ General Medical Council. *Good medical practice- The duties of a doctor registered with the General Medical Council*. London: General Medical Council; 2013.
- ⁷ As note 1 at para 24.
- ⁸ As note 1, at para 25.
- ⁹ As note 3, at para 31.
- ¹⁰ As note 3, at para 16.
- ¹¹ NHS Choices. *Medicines use review (MUR) service*. www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/medicines-use-review.aspx (accessed 23 November 2016).
- ¹² Taylor D, Paton C & Kapur S. *The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines in Psychiatry*. 12th edition. Wiley Blackwell. 2015 at p 233.
- ¹³ As note 3, para 31.
- ¹⁴ As note 2, para 42.
- ¹⁵ As note 3, para 29.
- ¹⁶ Waddell L and Taylor M. A new self-rating scale for detecting atypical or second-generation antipsychotic side-effects. *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 2008; 22(3): 238-243. doi:10.1177/0269881107087976 (accessed 17th November 2016).
- ¹⁷ Humber NHS Foundation Trust. *Guidelines for the Medicines Management Tool for Antipsychotics 2013*. <http://www.humber.nhs.uk/Downloads/Services/Pharmacy/Guidelines/Medicines%20management%20tool%20for%20antipsychotics.pdf> (accessed 21st September 2016).
- ¹⁸ National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. *Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults: prevention and management*. Clinical Guidance 178. London: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence; 2014. Para 1.1.3. (accessed 21st September 2016).
- ¹⁹ NHS Choices. *Common Health Problems. How Should Anti-Depressants be Discontinued?*. <http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/869.aspx?CategoryID=73&SubCategoryID=104> (accessed 27th September 2016).
- ²⁰ As note 3, at para 31.
- ²¹ As note 2, at para 41.
- ²² As note 3, at para 43.
- ²³ As note 5, at para 24.41.

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This factsheet is available
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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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We'd love to know if this information helped you.

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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quality of life for everyone
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Don't have access to the web?

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