



# Medication for mental illness

## Medication for mental illness

Medications that are used to treat mental illness are called psychotropics. These are drugs that act on the brain and nervous system.

You might already take medication for a physical condition like asthma or heart disease. In the same way, medications are used to treat mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and psychosis. Medication can make you feel better and help you to get on with your life.

All psychotropic medications require a prescription.

### Talk to your doctor about medication

This fact sheet does not replace talking to your doctor.

Your GP or psychiatrist is your best source of information on medications for mental illness.

They will tell you what the medication is expected to do, and let you know about potential side effects.

Your doctor should:

- provide you with written information
- answer any questions you may have
- check that you understand.

## Who can prescribe medications for mental illness?

Your psychiatrist or GP (family doctor) can prescribe medications for mental illness.

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who are experts in mental health. They have special training in prescribing medication and providing other treatments to help people with mental illness.

Find a psychiatrist  
[yourhealthinmind.org/find](http://yourhealthinmind.org/find)

## How do medications treat mental illness?

Medications work by rebalancing the chemicals in the brain. Different types of medication act on different chemical pathways.

## Why are medications prescribed?

Some people with a mental illness need medication to get better.

Medication can be used to treat immediate symptoms. In other cases, it's used long-term to stop an illness from returning (often called 'relapse').

Medication is only one part of treatment for mental illness. It is usually offered together with psychological treatment (talking therapy), education and lifestyle advice.

Your doctor will review your situation, current diagnosis and physical health.

Together you will consider all options for treatment, including no medication if that's best for you.

You get a say in the medication your doctor prescribes for you, but your doctor doesn't have to prescribe the medication you ask for.

## What types of medication are used to treat mental illness?

Most psychotropic medications are tablets or capsules you swallow every day. Some are available as syrups or injections.

For complete details on all medications currently approved for use in Australia

[nps.org.au](http://nps.org.au)

New Zealanders can go to Choice and Medication  
[choiceandmedication.org](http://choiceandmedication.org)

Below are a selection of the most commonly prescribed medications for mental illness.

### Antidepressant medications

Antidepressant medications are mainly used to treat depression and anxiety disorders. They may also be used for obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias or post-traumatic stress disorder.

They help to improve your sleep, energy, appetite, mood and negative thoughts about yourself.

Examples of antidepressant medications are citalopram, escitalopram, fluoxetine, sertraline and venlafaxine.

### Antipsychotic medications

Antipsychotic medications are used to treat:

- schizophrenia
- some types of depression
- acute bipolar disorder
- mania
- delirium
- dementia.

They help with hallucinations and delusions, anxiety, agitation and problems with mood, thinking and socialising.

Examples of antipsychotic medications are amisulpride, haloperidol, olanzapine, quetiapine and risperidone.

### Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines are sometimes used to treat anxiety and insomnia.

They're not recommended as an initial treatment for anxiety because they can be addictive, and their effects only last as long as you're taking them.

Examples of benzodiazepines are diazepam and temazepam.

### Medications for addiction

Medications for addiction are used to:

- reduce withdrawal symptoms
- treat cravings in people who have an addiction.

Examples of drugs used for heroin withdrawal are buprenorphine, methadone and naltrexone.

Drugs used for alcohol withdrawal include acamprosate and disulfiram.

### Medications for dementia

Dementia medications are used to improve thinking and memory.

They work for a limited time, usually from 6 months to 2 years.

Examples of medications for dementia are donepezil, rivastigmine and memantine.

### Mood stabilisers

Mood stabilisers are used to treat:

- bipolar disorder
- schizoaffective disorder.

They help to make mood swings less severe and reduce irritability and aggression. If you are taking mood stabilisers you will need tests to monitor the levels in your blood.

Examples of mood stabilisers are lithium and valproate.

### Stimulant medication

Stimulants are used to treat:

- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- narcolepsy (a type of sleep disorder).

They help to improve attention, concentration and alertness.

Examples of stimulant medications are dextroamphetamine and methylphenidate.

## Medication names

Each medication has a few names: a generic name and one or more brand names (also called proprietary or trade names). Each company that makes the medication has its own brand name.

For example:

Generic name	Brand names
Fluoxetine	Prozac®, Fluotex®, Lovan®, Zactin®

## Side effects

Like all medications, medications for mental illness can have side effects you should look out for.

Key points about side effects

- Many people will never feel any side effects.
- Some people will feel so bad it makes it hard to stay on the medication.
- There are some rare side effects that can be life-threatening.
- Details of side effects are included on the printed leaflet that comes with your medication.
- Talk to your psychiatrist or GP if side effects are bothering you.

➤ For Australians, these leaflets are also published online at NPS Medicinewise

[nps.org.au](https://www.nps.org.au)

➤ New Zealanders can access this information at Choice and Medication.

[choiceandmedication.org](https://www.choiceandmedication.org)

There are two groups of common side effects:

- physical side effects (such as high blood pressure, weight gain, high cholesterol levels, sexual problems and tremors)
- psychological side effects (such as restlessness, anxiety, lack of energy, or sleepiness).

Side effects will often feel worst in the first week, then get better over time.

### If you have side effects that bother you

Discuss with your doctor:

- the changes you've noticed since starting medication, both good and bad
- what matters to you – some side effects might be listed as 'minor' in the product information, but to you they might be a major issue
- what you can do to reduce side effects, such as changing when you take the medication, doing more exercise, eating healthy meals or drinking more water.

### What to tell your doctor about yourself:

- any other medical conditions you have, such as high blood pressure or diabetes
- if you are pregnant, breastfeeding or considering becoming pregnant
- other prescription medications you are taking
- over the counter drugs you take, such as pain killers, antacids or urinary alkalinisers such as Ural®

- herbal supplements, complementary or alternative medicines and vitamins you are taking
- if you smoke
- your alcohol or other drug use
- your eating habits or dietary restrictions
- if you drive a truck or heavy vehicle or use machinery for work.

## Combining medications

Psychiatrists are experts in how medications interact with each other. This includes all types of substances, from aspirin to herbal supplements, alcohol and prescription drugs.

Your psychiatrist can review these medication combinations. They can change your medication and dose to reduce side effects or interactions.

## How to get the best results from your medication

### Take it as prescribed

Take your medication as prescribed by your doctor.

Medication may need to be taken before or after food.

A pre-packed kit from your pharmacist or a smartphone reminder app might help you to remember to take your medication.

Keep any notes or printed leaflets about the medication you're taking.

### Allow time for it to work

You need to keep taking your medication, even if you don't notice it working straight away.

Some medications take days or longer to work.

### Talk to your doctor

Talk to your doctor about what you expect your treatment will do. Make sure you both have the same idea about what the effect of the medication will be.

Never stop or change your medication unless you and your doctor have agreed.

## Getting medication right for you

It can take time to work out what type and how much medication is right for you.

This might involve:

- trying different medications
- increasing or decreasing the amount you take
- changing when you take the medication.

## Stopping medication

If you want to stop taking your medication, speak to your doctor first. Discuss why you want to stop, whether you need other treatments and what they might be, and how to stop gradually.

Talk to close family and friends about your intention to stop taking medication.

- Stopping medication suddenly, particularly at high doses, can make you feel sick.
- There is also a risk that your original symptoms will return. They can be more severe.

## Regular check-ups

You will need to get regular check-ups while taking medication.

Your psychiatrist and/or GP will continue to review your mental health and your reaction to the medication.

Your GP will check your weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Some medications need extra blood tests, which your GP can organise.

Check-ups are a chance for you to ask any new questions that have come up while taking the medication.

Your dose and type of medication will probably need to change over time. Regular check-ups will help to ensure it's still working for you.

## Paying for medication

### Australia

Most medications used to treat mental illness are listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

The PBS reduces the cost of medications to Australian residents. If you have a Health Care Card you will get a further discount.

### New Zealand

Many medications are government subsidised in New Zealand so that you pay only NZ\$5 per prescription. Prescriptions for children aged under 13 are free. Once you've paid for 20 prescriptions in a calendar year, other prescriptions in that year will be free.

### Generic brand medication

Generic brands are often cheaper than brand name medication. They have the same active ingredients and work just as well.

Generic brands are just as safe as brand name medications. All approved medications go through a rigorous testing and approval process.

### Off-label prescriptions

Your doctor may recommend a medication that is provided 'off-label'.

This is where a medication is used for a condition or for an age group (for example children) that is not listed on the product information.

If this is the case, your doctor should explain why they recommend this treatment. You will have to pay the full amount for the medication, which can make it expensive.

➤ Read more about off-label prescribing in Australia [nps.org.au/australian-prescriber/articles/off-label-prescribing-6](https://www.nps.org.au/australian-prescriber/articles/off-label-prescribing-6)

➤ Read about off-label (called unapproved prescribing) in New Zealand [medsafe.govt.nz/profs/Rlss/unapp.asp](https://www.medsafe.govt.nz/profs/Rlss/unapp.asp)

### Buying medication on the internet

You are putting your health at risk by using medication purchased online.

There is no way of knowing exactly what is in any tablet or capsule you buy on the internet.

## More information

- Your psychiatrist
  - Your GP
  - Your pharmacist
- Australian NPS MedicineWise  
**nps.org.au**
- Medsafe New Zealand  
**medsafe.govt.nz**

If you are concerned about a missed dose or if you have taken too much of your medication, call

Australian Poisons Information Centre 13 11 26

New Zealand National Poisons Centre 0800 764 766

## Remember

- ✓ Medication can work well to treat mental illness.
- ✓ Some medications will relieve symptoms, others you need to keep taking long-term to stay well.
- ✓ Talk to your psychiatrist, GP or pharmacist if you have any questions.

This fact sheet is also available online at [www.yourhealthinmind.org](http://www.yourhealthinmind.org)

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### About us

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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Australian &  
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Psychiatrists



This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.