

TRAINING TOOLKIT
FOR
OVERVIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH MEDICATIONS
FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS
FALL 2011



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. *What are psychotropic medications?*

Psychotropic medications are those that are used to treat symptoms of any mental illness.

2. *How do you know if a medication is approved for a certain illness?*

The Federal Drug Administration (FDA) is the government agency that approves medications for specific indications. These indications are listed near the top of the package insert; they are based on research studies that demonstrate the medication is more effective than a placebo for treatment of an illness, or symptom related to an illness.

Package inserts are public information, are available on the FDA website or other online sites, and are distributed to patients when medications are filled at a pharmacy.

3. *Is it true that a lot of psychotropic medications are not approved for use in children?*

Yes. There is a significant and worrisome lack of research data available related to the safety and efficacy of psychotropic medications in children. There is even considerably less information about the use of these medications in very young children. For a variety of reasons, it is more difficult to recruit children for research studies.

There are some medications that are approved for use in adults and not in children, but that have been found by clinicians to be helpful in the treatment of similar symptoms in children. At times, it can be considered appropriate standard of care to use a psychotropic medication in children that has not been approved by the FDA for use in children.

4. *What is the difference between a psychiatrist, psychologist, and therapist?*

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor (MD). All medical doctors must attend medical school after undergraduate training. Following medical school, psychiatrists must complete a four-year residency. Child psychiatrists complete an additional year of residency training (five years total after medical school).

Therapists must attend four years of undergraduate training, followed by postgraduate training. The training required, and licensing requirements, varies by state. Psychologists (Psy.D. or Ph.D.) are sometimes referred to as therapists. Psychologists complete a doctoral level program, followed by a clinical internship and sometimes postdoctoral training. Psy.D. and Ph.D. degrees are slightly different, and related to differences in research/clinical training requirements.

Other therapists (LPC/LAPC, LCSW/LMSW/MSW, LMFT/LAMFT) complete a masters level program, followed by a clinical internship. Fully licensed therapists (LPC, LCSW, LMFT) have completed three years of supervised clinical work after the one-year clinical internship.

Psychiatrists complete psychiatric evaluations, including diagnosis and treatment recommendations. Psychologists can complete a diagnostic verification, other therapists can complete a diagnostic impression, and both can make treatment recommendations not related to medication.

5. *Who can prescribe psychotropic medications?*

Any medical doctor can prescribe any medication, however most doctors only feel comfortable prescribing medications that fall within their specialty. Psychiatrists are medical doctors that almost exclusively prescribe psychotropic medications. Therapists cannot prescribe medications.

6. *What is bipolar disorder?*

Bipolar disorder is classified as a mood disorder; it is not classified as a behavior disorder. It requires an episode, or multiple episodes of mania or a mixed mood disturbance. Most people with bipolar disorder also experience a major depressive episode. The mood episode must last a certain length of time and be accompanied by other symptoms that are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV).

There are several classifications of bipolar disorder depending on the length and severity of mood disturbance. There is also discussion within the psychiatric community about distinctions between childhood- and adult-onset bipolar disorder.

7. *Is all bad behavior mental illness?*

No. However, there are a group of illnesses termed disruptive behavior disorders. This group includes Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), and Conduct Disorder (CD).

Medication is routinely used to treat ADHD, and has been found to be superior to interventions that do not include medication in most all research studies available to date. In fact, there is research data for ADHD medications that indicates they can be safely used to treat very young children. There are not any psychotropic medications that are indicated exclusively for the treatment of ODD or CD.

8. *Can you treat mental illness without medication?*

Yes. There is significant research data showing that some symptoms of mental illness respond well to treatments other than medication, such as psychotherapy. The clinical judgment regarding whether or not to recommend medication for a specific illness is made by a psychiatrist.

9. *Is it true that antidepressants can cause suicide?*

A “black box warning” issued by the FDA is included on package inserts when research has indicated that a medication has the potential to cause serious adverse effects.

In 2004, the FDA issued a black box warning for antidepressant medications (e.g. Prozac, Zoloft, etc.). The warning was based on an increased rate of suicidal thinking and behaviors in children, adolescents, and young adults under 24 years old taking these medications. It is important also to know that, despite this observation, no completed suicides were recorded.

Following the black box warning, and a previous public health advisory, a significant decline in the prescription of these medications was observed in 2005.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has issued specific guidelines that assist practitioners and the public in making an informed decision about the frequency of follow-up should one of these medications be recommended.

10. What are the potential side effects of medication?

This question is complex. First, side effects are unique to each individual medication, but some classes of medications have similar side effects. It is important to ask the doctor that prescribes the psychotropic medication about common side effects as well as rare, potentially life-threatening side effects.

Also, you should ask if blood work is necessary before starting, or while taking, a medication; some psychotropic medications must be at a certain level in your blood to provide optimal benefit.

Many medications will affect appetite or sleep patterns. Any side effects of medication should be discussed with the psychiatrist as soon as possible.

Weight gain, increased cholesterol, and early-onset diabetes in children and adolescents have been of particular concern with the increased use of antipsychotic medications. The effect of weight gain on other body organs, and overall functional ability, should also be considered.