

Using Anti-Anxiety Medication

Understanding the role of medication...

There are a number of different medications used to treat anxiety, though no specific names are mentioned here. They are not normally used unless anxiety is severe or lasts a long time. Ask your GP or guide if you are not sure whether you are taking medication for anxiety.

Anti-anxiety medication doesn't help everyone who takes it, or 'cure' the anxiety – the most it does it relieve some of the anxiety symptoms.

The medication is used for the treatment of different anxiety problems such as:

- Generalised anxiety, where the person worries about a lot of different things... The worry causes physical symptoms and has an effect on the person's behaviour.
- Panic attacks, where the person is so anxious that they feel something terrible will happen...
- Phobic disorders, such as social phobia (extreme shyness) and agoraphobia (fear of being trapped, especially in crowded places such as shops and buses)...
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), where the person does things in a ritualised way, or cleans and checks things over and over again, in an effort to stay in control and stop harmful things happening.

Why use anti-anxiety medication for the treatment of anxiety?

The 'Five Areas' model shows that there are links between thinking, feelings, behaviour and physical symptoms when we get anxious. Because of these links, medication can help improvement in all areas. Talk to your guide about the 'Five Areas' model if you don't know what it is – a lot of the leaflets in this series use the 'Five Areas' model of self-help.

How long does the medication take to work?

Most anti-anxiety medication is started at a low dose, which is increased over a few weeks. It might take weeks or even months for you to feel the full benefit - for example, where medication is used to treat panic attacks. It can take several weeks before the tablets begin to have any effect. It can then take up to 12 weeks for the full effect. It is very important to keep taking the tablets regularly to get the full effect, though sometimes your doctor might advise you to only take the tablets when your symptoms are worse, to reduce the risk of dependence.

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What happens when you stop taking the medication?

Anxiety levels sometimes get worse again once you stop taking your medication. Therefore, it is important to see your medication as only one part of a package of care. Your package should include learning new ways of coping with your anxiety, such as guided self-help and 'talking therapies'.

Discuss making a package of care for yourself with your guide.

Benzodiazepines (minor tranquillisers) These are short-term medications and are not usually for long-term use. This is because, over time, higher and higher doses are needed in order to have the same effect. About one in three people have problems with addiction and withdrawal symptoms when stopping the tablets, so they are prescribed much less commonly than they used to be.

If you have taken benzodiazepines for a long time, it is important that you don't stop taking them – or any other medication – without seeing your doctor.

Do anti-anxiety medications have side-effects?

All tablets have side-effects. However, modern anti-anxiety treatments don't often have very severe side-effects, and most of these go away within a few days of starting the tablets. Please see your doctor or talk to your guide if you are worried about your medication or how it is affecting you.

Can I drive or use machinery if I am taking tablets?

Check the advice leaflet with your prescription, or ask your doctor. Many anti-anxiety medications can affect your ability to drive and use machinery. They can also mean that alcohol will have a much stronger effect on you than normal.

Conclusion

Remember that if you are taking medication, the best way to move forward is to use self-help therapy (such as this guided self-help) alongside or instead of the tablets. Medication should be a last resort when you feel stuck, or when your anxiety has stayed at a distressing level for some time.

Putting into practice what you have learned...

If you want to find out about anti-anxiety medications, please see your doctor.

If you have found any parts of this leaflet unhelpful, upsetting or confusing, please talk to your guide.

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