

INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS ABOUT PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

WHAT ARE PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS?

These are serious medications that affect a person's mind, emotions and behaviors. Like many medications, these can be powerful. They are prescribed to help people feel better and do the things they enjoy, such as going to school, having fun with friends or playing sports. Examples include:

- Anti-anxiety and sleep medications
- Antidepressants
- Antipsychotics
- Mood stabilizers
- Stimulants

For example, an antidepressant can be used for depression, but some antidepressants may also be prescribed for anxiety, sleep problems, bed wetting, migraines, and more.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:

- The first person to contact for health information should be the youth's prescribing physician.
- Telehealth Ontario:
1-866-797-0000 (24/7 health advice)
- MedsCheck: Contact your local pharmacy for a medication review.
- The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO has developed a youth-oriented resource with information and tools to help manage your medications. To learn more, visit www.onthepoint.ca
- Here to Help: www.heretohelp.bc.ca/publications/factsheets
- MCYS YouthConnect:
www.youthconnect.ca
- Teen Mental Health:
www.teenmentalhealth.org
- Children's Mental Health Ontario:
www.kidsmentalhealth.ca
- Canadian Mental Health Association:
www.cmha.ca
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH): www.camh.net or
1-800-463-6273 (toll free)

WHY DO PEOPLE TAKE THEM?

- People take these medications for many different reasons, for example to treat symptoms such as sleep problems, anger, worry, hallucinations, feeling easily upset, having racing thoughts or difficulty paying attention.
- They are used to treat illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder, psychotic disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- Psychotropic medications can decrease or stop troubling symptoms and help a youth get back to doing the things that she/he enjoys. They can help people who are feeling well stay that way by preventing symptoms from returning.
- Psychotropic medications may not work for everyone. If you are caring for someone who is taking them, it is important to build trust and encourage open discussions about their medications, possible side effects or any other symptoms. As a caregiver, you play a critical role in helping youth to monitor their treatment, and in keeping them safe by monitoring that medications are being used only as prescribed.

ENCOURAGE SOMEONE YOU CARE FOR TO ASK THEIR HEALTH PRACTITIONER* LOTS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR MEDICATIONS.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SIDE EFFECTS:

- Side effects are unwanted effects that can happen with all medications, but not everyone gets them. Understanding the possible side effects is critical in making sure psychotropic medications are used safely and effectively.
- Each person experiences psychotropic medications differently and there are various possible side effects with any medications. Learn what to watch for and what to do if a side effect happens. **Speak to the experts who know about medications such as doctors, nurses and pharmacists about the person you are caring for and their use of psychotropic medications.** For each side effect there are a number of key questions to ask a health practitioner and/or pharmacist:
 - How often does it happen?
 - What does it look like?
 - How serious is it?
 - Are there any potential short or long-lasting effects to be concerned about?
 - When can it happen?
 - What can cause it?
 - How can it be avoided?
 - Does it go away on its own?
- If you continue to have questions, or feel your questions have not been answered properly, you may want to seek a second opinion for the youth.
- When monitoring for possible side effects, cooperation is key. A youth may not know she/he is having a side effect, for example, if the medication makes her/him confused or irritable. Some questions to ask a youth taking psychotropic medication include:
 - How often does the side effect happen?
 - Is it getting better or worse?
 - How long have you been experiencing the side effect?
 - Are there other concerns you have about this side effect?

*Health Practitioner includes: doctors, nurses and other health practitioners listed under the Health Care Consent Act.

THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

Multiple Medications: Possible side effects can be more likely to occur in someone taking several medications as some drugs interact with each other. Monitor for possible side effects and make sure everyone involved in the youth's care is aware that she/he is taking multiple medications.

Drug Interactions: Alcohol, marijuana and other street drugs, alternative therapies (including natural health products) and even some foods can make the symptoms of a mental illness worse. They can also cause new or worsened side effects of psychotropic medications. Ask a health practitioner and/or pharmacist if this is a concern.

Stopping Medications Suddenly: Stopping some medications can lead to a serious reaction, especially when done suddenly and without proper monitoring. This can happen when a youth refuses to take her/his medications, but it can also happen if a prescription runs out and is not refilled promptly. Reactions are usually mild, but can be quite serious. These reactions or possible side effects should be documented, and youth should see their health practitioner if they stop taking their medications.

Possible Side Effects: Mild or moderate side effects can include things like weight gain, weight loss and irritability and should be closely monitored. If a youth is talking about suicide, attempting suicide or harming her/himself, take these comments/actions seriously. Contact the youth's doctor or hospital immediately.

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

Monitor: You may not be an expert, but because you see the youth often, you can play a critical role in monitoring the benefits and possible side effects of medications.

Be involved: Caregivers are critical in supporting a youth's mental health. Ask the health practitioner or pharmacist about possible side effects and possible drug interactions, even with common over-the-counter medications and vitamins.

Protect youths' rights: Youth have the right to 1) know their rights, 2) have all information about their personal health kept confidential, 3) have clear and understandable information provided to them, 4) have all of their questions answered, and 5) seek a second opinion, if they choose.

Be non-judgmental: Youth dealing with a mental illness face a society that doesn't fully understand these issues. Your attitude and support can be extremely helpful in coping with stigma.

Support: Encourage youth to learn about their medications. Help them express their questions and concerns and support them to get answers from their health practitioner.

Communicate: Establish good communication with health practitioners, pharmacists, workers and teachers. Always respect the confidentiality of the youth when communicating with others.

Create a crisis plan: Talk with the youth about an appropriate course of action in a medications-related crisis. Involve health practitioners in developing these plans.

Get information: When the youth's primary health practitioner is unavailable, take advantage of other resources:

- **Another health practitioner**, making sure to provide all relevant information.
- **Pharmacists:** Calls or visits to a pharmacy can quickly address many questions. Get to know the pharmacists and use the same pharmacy for all medication needs.
- **Telehealth Ontario** is a free 24 hour/day telephone service that provides health information and advice from registered nurses. Call **1-866-797-0000** if you are worried about a side effect or have other concerns about the youth's health.
- **MedsCheck** is a comprehensive medications review program offered by appointment by pharmacists in Ontario. Call your pharmacy to find out more.

Protect yourself: Understand your own emotional and physical limits. Look for ways to keep yourself rested, healthy and supported.

PRACTICAL TIPS:

- Keep an up-to-date record of the name, dose, strength and directions for each medication.
- Make sure that youth take their medications as directed. Tell the health practitioner if medications are being taken differently than prescribed.
- Know what to do if a medication dose is skipped or missed.
- Avoid running out of medications and direct the child/youth to not stop the medications suddenly unless under the advice of a health practitioner.
- Use monitoring or tracking sheets to assess changes in symptoms, activities, and possible side effects related to taking medications.
- Use one pharmacy. Both you and the youth should get to know the pharmacists.
- Youth should not be allowed to share medications.
- Don't keep old medications around. Talk to your pharmacists about the best way to dispose of the medications.
- Psychotropic medications have "street value" and can be sold or used inappropriately. Keep medications in a safe and locked location.
- Talk to the youth's health practitioner. Tell her/him about all of the medications the youth is currently taking and has taken in the past, including herbal medicines, vitamins, over-the-counter medications, alcohol and other drugs. Let her/him know about any allergies the youth has.
- Because youth can react to medications differently from adults, it is particularly important to be watchful for troubling reactions and side effects during the first few weeks of treatment.

This document was created by The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO (the Centre) with financial support from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. For more information, contact the Centre at (613) 737-2297 or visit www.onthepoint.ca.