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Steps to stop taking medication

1. Make an appointment to speak with a health care provider.
2. Have an honest conversation about why you want to stop the medication.
3. If your health care provider agrees that stopping the medication is appropriate, follow the instructions provided by the health care provider carefully.
4. Ask about what symptoms may indicate withdrawal or return of disease, and keep an eye out for these symptoms.
5. Consider asking friends, family and/or health care providers to help monitor for symptoms.
6. Stay in touch with your health care provider during the process.

The end of medication treatment

After taking medication for mental health for a period of time, people may think, "I feel better. Do I still need to take my medication?" The answer is complicated. There are many factors to consider before stopping a medication. Some of those factors are described below. Asking a health care provider is always recommended before stopping a medication to make sure that it is done safely.

It can lead to withdrawal symptoms

Some medications may cause withdrawal symptoms if they are stopped suddenly. For example, stopping an antidepressant too quickly can cause flu-like symptoms, nausea, trouble sleeping, or anxiety.¹ Some medications can cause dangerous withdrawal symptoms. For example, stopping benzodiazepine medications such as alprazolam (Xanax®) or clonazepam (Klonopin®) too quickly can cause severe anxiety, trouble sleeping, or even seizures.² Benzodiazepines are unlikely to cause dangerous withdrawal symptoms if they are only used once in a while (such as only once or twice a week) or for a short period of time (such as for less than 2 weeks).

The symptoms may come back

Medications are usually started to help people feel better, but they are also very important in helping people stay well. Stopping a medication quickly can cause relapse of symptoms. For example, after stopping antidepressants, symptoms of depression or anxiety could return. After stopping a mood stabilizer like lithium, there is a high risk of a mood episode occurring.³ Stopping antipsychotic medications suddenly can cause hallucinations or other symptoms to come back. The risk of this happening can be reduced if the dose of the medication is slowly decreased.⁴

When is stopping okay?

The choice to stop medications depends on the illness, the medication, and the person taking the medication. Some medications (such as benzodiazepines) may be stopped in order to reduce the risk of long-term side effects. For some people, they are able to stop medications after their symptoms improve. Other people may need to take medication life-long to prevent symptoms from returning. Always ask your health care provider before stopping a medication. Different people may have different experiences when stopping medications. Just because one person is okay stopping a medication at once does not mean that it is safe for everyone.

When stopping a medication, it is usually done in a slow manner called "tapering." This involves slowly decreasing the dose over a course of weeks to months in order to reduce the risk of the symptoms coming back or medication withdrawal symptoms. This also makes it easy to go back to a higher dose if symptoms do occur.

General Comments About Stopping Common Classes of Medications*

Medication Type	What The Process Often Looks Like	What To Look Out For
Antidepressants ¹	The dose is slowly decreased over multiple weeks to months.	Return of depressed mood, anxiety, flu-like symptoms, nausea, trouble sleeping, fatigue, electric-shock sensations in the brain.
Benzodiazepines ²	The dose is slowly decreased over months to years.	Increased anxiety, trouble sleeping, restlessness, and sweating. If the benzodiazepine was used for a long period of time, the symptoms may be more severe.
Mood stabilizers ³	The dose is slowly decreased over at least one month.	Tremors, excessive thirst. Manic episodes: racing thoughts, becoming more impulsive, increased risky behavior, etc. Depressive episodes: depressed mood, decreased interest in activities, etc.
Antipsychotics ^{4,5}	The dose is slowly reduced over weeks to months.	Restlessness, trouble sleeping, nausea, return of hallucinations, paranoid thoughts, or related symptoms.

* The information in this chart is based on what the process looks like for most people. Stopping a medication may be different for each individual person.



Go online to find more information and to view the references for this toolkit.

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