
Treating Disruptive Behaviour in People with Dementia: Antipsychotic drugs are usually not the best choice



People with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia can become restless, aggressive, or disruptive. They may believe things that are not true. They may see or hear things that are not there. These symptoms can cause even more distress than the loss of memory.

Health care providers often prescribe powerful antipsychotic drugs to treat these behaviours:

- Olanzapine (Zyprexa® and generic)
- Quetiapine (Seroquel®)
- Risperidone (Risperdal® and generic)

If you are uncertain if your loved one is taking one of these medications please ask their health care team.

In most cases, antipsychotics should not be the first choice for treatment, according to the Canadian Geriatrics Society. Here's why:

Antipsychotic drugs don't help much.

Studies have compared these drugs to sugar pills or placebos. These studies showed that antipsychotics usually don't reduce disruptive behaviour in older dementia patients.

Antipsychotic drugs can cause serious side effects.

Health care providers can prescribe these drugs for dementia for behavioural symptoms, but they cause serious side effects.

Side effects include:

- Drowsiness and confusion—which can reduce social contact and mental skills, and increase falls.



- Weight gain.
- Diabetes.
- Shaking or tremors (which can be permanent).
- Pneumonia.
- Sudden death.

Other approaches often work better.

It is almost always best to try other approaches first, such as the suggestions listed below.

Make sure the patient has a thorough exam and medicine review.

- The cause of the behaviour may be a common condition, such as constipation, infection, vision or hearing problems, sleep problems, or pain.
- Many drugs and drug combinations can cause confusion and agitation in older people.

Talk to a behaviour specialist.

This person can help you find non-drug ways to deal with the problem. For example, when someone is startled, they may become agitated. It may help to warn the person before you touch them. The box at right provides more tips.

Consider other drugs first.

Talk to your health care provider about the following drugs that have been approved for treatment of disruptive behaviours:

- Drugs that slow mental decline in dementia.
- Antidepressants for people who have a history of depression or who are depressed as well as anxious.

Consider antipsychotic drugs if:

- Other steps have failed.
- Patients are severely distressed.
- Patients could hurt themselves or others.

Start the drug at the lowest possible dose. Caregivers and health care providers should watch the patient carefully to make sure that symptoms improve and that there are no serious side effects. The drugs should be stopped if they are not helping or are no longer needed.

About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

How this pamphlet was created:

This pamphlet was adapted with permission from a similar pamphlet used in the US Choosing Wisely campaign, organized by the ABIM Foundation. Modifications were made to ensure relevance for a Canadian audience. Canadian reviewers of this pamphlet included the Canadian Geriatrics Society.

This pamphlet is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this pamphlet is at your own risk.

Tips to help with disruptive behaviours

Keep a daily routine. People with dementia often become restless or irritable around dinner time.

- Do activities that use more energy earlier in the day, such as bathing.
- Eat the biggest meal at midday.
- Set a quiet mood in the evening, with lower lights, less noise, and soothing music.

Help the person exercise every day. Physical activity helps use nervous energy. It improves mood and sleep.

Don't argue with a person who's distressed.

- Distract the person with music, singing, or dancing.
- Ask the person to help with a simple task, such as setting the table or folding clothes.
- Take the person to another room or for a short walk.

Plan simple activities and social time. Boredom and loneliness can increase anxiety. Adult day programs can provide activities for older people. They also give caregivers a break.