



# Medications and People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

## Introduction

In general, all prescription and over-the-counter medications can potentially have side effects and drug interactions. Many people with IDD are more sensitive to side effects because they often take several different medications, thus increasing the likelihood of interactions.

Differing responses to medications that may be associated with co-occurring health conditions can also increase side effect potential. It is important to observe people closely, especially when a new drug is added or removed or with a dosage change, and report any concerns to your supervisor, nurse, pharmacist, and/or healthcare provider.

## General Considerations for People with IDD

In most circumstances, it is important to start low with medication therapies and increase the dose slowly when needed.

As medications are discontinued, many of them should be tapered slowly.

As medication dosages are adjusted, close monitoring is necessary to identify changes in the person.

A person may show signs of having either positive or negative effects due to a medication adjustment. A positive effect would be that a person who receives an antihistamine experiences relief of their allergy symptoms. A negative effect might be that they experience sleepiness from the same medication.

Any positive or negative changes noted as dosages are adjusted should be documented and reported to the appropriate person.

When possible, only start or adjust the dose of one medication at a time so it will be easier to note if the medication appears to be working or if there are any serious side effects the person is experiencing.

In general, only one medication in any particular drug class should be used at one time, and it should be stopped if another medication in the same class is started. Sometimes this requires lowering the dose of one medication and increasing the dose of another. Consult with the prescribing clinician if you have any of these concerns.

Monitor the person closely for at least two weeks after starting a new medication or increasing or decreasing the dose.

A regular review of all medications should be done at least yearly to ensure all the medications are still needed.

Any time a new medication is started or a dose change is made, pay close attention to differences in behavior, eating or drinking, levels of alertness, and levels of interest in activities. Remember, behavior is a form of communication and a behavior change may be the only indication that a person is experiencing a side effect from a medication.

Be sure you know to whom you should report possible side effects or behavior changes. This might be your supervisor, a nurse, or a healthcare provider.

In addition to these general monitoring suggestions, some medications have specific recommendations. Pay attention to the recommended routine monitoring when advised to do so.

Take a complete and accurate medication list to all healthcare provider appointments. All providers need to know what others are ordering.

## Commonly Seen Medication Effects

Medications have different risks and side effect profiles. Here are some of the effects you may see and descriptions of how they might present. If you suspect that someone may be experiencing side effects, report them to the prescribing clinician.

**Tardive dyskinesia (TD)** - involuntary, repetitive body movements that may consist of grimacing, lips-smacking, sticking one's tongue out, eye blinking, pursing of lips, rapid movements of limbs/torso, or other movements

**Urinary issues** - including making it harder for a person to urinate or making it difficult for a person to hold their urine leading to leakage or incontinence

**Extrapyramidal side-effects (EPS)** - drug-induced movement disorders that may appear as a tremor, slurred speech, restlessness, trouble moving extremities, anxiety, or paranoia

**Change in level of consciousness** - may appear as drowsiness, sedation, slower response times, sleepiness, or excessive tiredness, as well as loss of interest in regular activities

**Akathisia** - movement disorder characterized by a sense of restlessness and inability to sit still

**Weight gain or loss** - change in weight due to alterations in a person's appetite or metabolism

**Skin changes** - alterations in a person's skin, including a rash, itching, bruising, and sun sensitivity

**Falling** - increase in the risk of falling due to sedation, dizziness, or changes in balance

**Bowel issues** - includes bowel incontinence, diarrhea, or constipation

**Increase in fracture risk** - alterations in bone strength requiring increased bone fragility monitoring due to certain medications and their effects

# Major Medication Classes

## PSYCHOTROPICS

**Antipsychotics:** These drugs treat psychotic features of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, and/or as add-on therapy for depression. Examples include risperidone (Risperdal) or quetiapine (Seroquel).

Potential side effects include sleepiness, constipation, increase in blood sugar and lipid levels, dizziness and movement side effects, sensitivity to sunlight and skin rashes, weight gain, and an increase or start in new seizures.

Monitoring should include the potential for fall risk, routine fasting glucose and lipid levels, and AIMS testing for movement disorders, along with weight monitoring.

### Movement Disorders (Extrapyramidal Movements)

**Akathisia:** feeling of restlessness, the need to walk, and feeling unsettled, which can start within hours or days of initial medication consumption

**Parkinsonism:** slowness of movement, stone face, hand and foot tremors, mood changes which can start weeks to months after the start of therapy

**Tardive dyskinesia:** mouth and tongue movements, limb movements in a rhythmical writhing motion, difficulty swallowing, and eye blinking, which can start months to years after initial therapy or occur after the medication is stopped

## Major Medication Classes

<p><b>Antidepressants:</b> These medications can be used to treat depression, anxiety, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and premenstrual disorder. Examples include doxepin (Sinequan), citalopram (Celexa), and sertraline (Zoloft).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include mood changes, including suicidal thoughts or manic thoughts, nausea, insomnia, headache, constipation, dizziness, loss of appetite, agitation and anxiety, and loss of blood sodium and tremor.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include negative changes in mood and behavior, and any talk of suicidal thoughts should be reported immediately.</p>
<p><b>Mood Stabilizers:</b> These medications can be used to treat bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, schizophrenia, and various mood disorders. Examples include lithium, divalproex (Depakote), and lamotrigine (Lamictal).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include rashes or skin issues, cardiac and liver changes, sodium loss, dizziness, drowsiness, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include blood levels typically quarterly for those antiseizure medications that require it (phenytoin, carbamazepine, valproic acid), sodium levels, kidney function, and complete blood count periodically. Also, watch for dizziness-related falls or gait issues.</p>

## Major Medication Classes

<p><b>Antianxiety Medications:</b> These medications can be used to treat anxiety, sleep, major depressive disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social anxiety disorder. Examples include diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan), and buspirone (Buspar).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, movement disorders, dizziness, drowsiness, nausea, headache, nervousness, fatigue, inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, blurred vision, and abdominal pain.</p>
	<p>Monitoring: No routine tests are recommended, but watch for a potential increase in falls and sleepiness as well as possible overstimulation.</p>
<p><b>Sleep Medications:</b> These medications can be used for the short-term treatment of difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. Examples include zolpidem (Ambien) and eszopiclone (Lunesta).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include decreased mental alertness the next day following dosage, mood and behavior changes, loss of memory, headache, sleepiness, drugged feeling, and lightheadedness.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include watching for falls, prolonged sleepiness, mood changes, and unusual sleep-related behavior.</p>

## Major Medication Classes

<p><b>ADHD Medications:</b> These medications can be used for attention deficit or narcolepsy (falling asleep at inappropriate times throughout the day). Examples include lisdexamfetamine (Vyvanse) and methylphenidate (Ritalin).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include changes in mood or behavior, hypertension, weight loss, seizures, nervousness, inability to sleep, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, dizziness, and visual problems.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include baseline heart evaluation in people with underlying heart problems, periodic blood pressure and heart rate monitoring, and periodic height and weight measurements.</p>
<p><b>Antiseizure Medications:</b> These medications can be used to treat seizure disorders or mood issues. Examples include phenytoin (Dilantin) or carbamazepine (Tegretol).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include rashes or skin issues, cardiac and liver changes, sodium loss, dizziness, sleepiness, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, difficulty thinking clearly, and potential increased falls and broken bones. Teeth and gum changes can also occur, and loss of hair or increased development of hair.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include routine blood levels for those antiseizure medications that require it (phenytoin, carbamazepine, valproic acid), sodium levels, kidney function, and complete blood count periodically. Also, watch for dizziness-related falls or difficulty walking in a normal fashion.</p>
	<p>Report any seizures in as much detail as possible. Put it in writing before you forget. This helps determine the effectiveness of the current medications used to treat seizures. Ensure the person wears protective devices such as helmets that are properly fitted and worn as directed.</p>

## Major Medication Classes

<p><b>Anticholinergic Medications:</b> These medications can be used to treat overactive bladder and increased urination, treatment for asthma or chronic obstructive lung disease, stomach disorders, increased drooling, allergies, and symptoms of Parkinson's Disease. Examples include diphenhydramine (Benadryl) and oxybutynin (Ditropan).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, drowsiness, memory problems, hallucinations, and trouble urinating.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include evaluating the person to prevent overheating with exercise, hot baths, or hot weather. Also ensure that they have plenty to drink.</p>
<p><b>Bowel Medications:</b> These medications are used as stool softeners, fiber supplements, to stop diarrhea, or to increase the movement in the gastrointestinal tract to relieve constipation. Examples include docusate (Colace) and psyllium (Metamucil).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include diarrhea, cramping, changes in blood chemistry, stomach distension and stomach pain, increase in constipation, increased risk of obstruction, and weight gain or loss.</p>
	<p>Monitoring: No routine tests are required, but be sure to review bowel habits and any changes in a person's habits with a supervisor. Make sure the person is well-hydrated.</p>



## Major Medication Classes

<p><b>Gastrointestinal Medications:</b> These medications help to control acid reflux or heartburn. Examples include omeprazole (Prilosec) and famotidine (Pepcid).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include headache, diarrhea, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and deficiencies in some vitamins.</p>
	<p>Monitoring: No routine lab tests are required but make sure the medication is given at the time prescribed, as some are given in the morning and some at bedtime.</p>
<p><b>Cardiovascular Medications:</b> These medications help the heart function properly and may be used to control heart rate or blood pressure. Examples include lisinopril (Zestril) and propranolol (Inderal).</p>	<p>Potential side effects include slowing of the heart rate, blood pressure lowering, feeling faint when changing positions such as seated to standing, drowsiness, rashes, and nausea.</p>
	<p>Monitoring should include checking blood pressure and pulse as often as ordered and reporting it to the nurse or supervisor as directed.</p>

Medications have many useful benefits. It is important to ensure they are used safely and to monitor for any adverse effects to help people receive the most benefit with the least risk. Always consult your pharmacist, nurse, or healthcare provider for any concerns or specific information about any particular medication. Familiarize yourself with the more common monitoring recommendations and side effects of medications taken by the people you support.



Developed by IntellectAbility in collaboration with the  
Missouri Division of Developmental Disabilities

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