



# Prescribing Psychotropic Medication for Non-cognitive Symptoms for People with Dementia:

A guide for people  
with dementia  
and their family  
carers and  
supporters



## About this leaflet

This leaflet explains what psychotropic medications are and when they might be prescribed for you as a person with dementia. It tells you about:

- the possible side effects of using these medications
- why you need regular reviews of the medication
- where you can find more information

The information in this leaflet is not medical advice. We encourage you to ask your healthcare provider (your doctor, nurse, pharmacist etc) if you have any questions.

## What are psychotropic medications?

They are drugs that act on your brain and can influence your emotions, your mood, or your behaviour. Some psychotropic medications may be beneficial for both cognitive and non-cognitive symptoms. Cognitive symptoms of dementia include memory loss, problems with language, and difficulty managing everyday tasks. Antipsychotics and benzodiazepines are the psychotropic medications most commonly used for distressing non-cognitive symptoms. There is more information about the different types of psychotropic medication below.

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## What are 'non-cognitive symptoms'?

Non-cognitive symptoms are symptoms related to mood, behaviour and psychosis. Non-cognitive symptoms are sometimes called Behavioural and Psychological Symptoms of Dementia (BPSD). They may include:

- mood disturbances
- personality changes
- agitation
- aggression
- pacing
- altered sexual behaviours
- changed sleep patterns
- appetite disturbances
- hallucinations
- delusions (false beliefs)

You need to know about these because psychotropic medications may be prescribed for you to help reduce these symptoms.

## When might I be prescribed a psychotropic medication?

Your healthcare provider should explore your non-cognitive symptoms to see if they are due to dementia or another reason. For example, you may be in pain, be constipated, or have an infection or vision or hearing problems or find it hard to sleep.

### Healthcare professionals only consider psychotropic medication when:

- other approaches have not worked
- you are in severe distress
- you are likely to hurt yourself or others
- its use aligns with your previously expressed wishes and preferences (where possible/available)

### It is very important for your healthcare provider to support you to try other approaches before using medication for non-cognitive symptoms. Other approaches include:

- person-centred care with you at the heart (This involves taking an individualised approach, recognising and valuing each person's dignity, respecting them and tailoring responses to their unique needs)
- physical exercise
- making simple adjustments to social surroundings such as having more visitors or supporting carers better
- meaningful engagement
- therapies such as music therapy or garden therapy

These can all make a positive difference.



## What should happen before I am prescribed psychotropic medication?

Before you are prescribed psychotropic medication, your healthcare provider will assess you to find out about your:

- Symptoms – what type you have, how often they happen, and if there is any pattern to when they occur
- Other factors like unmet needs or stress which contribute to non-cognitive symptoms.

We advise that a family member or supporter comes with you to help give information for the assessment. Your healthcare provider may then discuss a trial of these medications. A trial means you would be on the medication first and then your healthcare provider would closely check to see how you are and if the medication should be stopped or continued.

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## What are the possible side effects of psychotropic medications?

All medications can cause side effects. These vary between the different types of psychotropic medications, and also vary from person to person. Side effects might include:

- Drowsiness and confusion
- Poor balance and falls
- Weight gain and diabetes
- Constipation
- Shaking or tremors
- Increased risk of pneumonia
- Increased risk of stroke and dying (this side effect is specifically linked to antipsychotic medications)



## What are the types of psychotropic medication?

There are several types of psychotropic medication which we outline below:

Type	Use	Examples
Antipsychotics	To treat some psychotic symptoms like delusions and hallucinations.  They can also be helpful in treating severe aggression and agitation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● risperidone</li> <li>● olanzapine</li> <li>● quetiapine</li> </ul>
Antidepressants	To treat: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● major depressive disorders and conditions</li> <li>● Obsessive-compulsive disorder</li> <li>● Generalised anxiety disorder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● sertraline</li> <li>● escitalopram</li> <li>● trazodone</li> </ul>
Anticonvulsants	To treat seizures and also mood problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● carbamazepine</li> <li>● valproate</li> </ul>
Acetylcholinesterase Inhibitors	To help cognition (thinking) (Also known as cognitive enhancers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● donepezil</li> <li>● rivastigmine</li> <li>● galantamine</li> </ul>
NMDA receptor antagonists	To help cognition (thinking) (Also known as a cognitive enhancer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● memantine</li> </ul>
Benzodiazepines	To treat anxiety and problems with sleeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● alprazolam e.g. Xanax</li> </ul>
Z-type medications	To treat sleeping problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● zopiclone</li> </ul>

The examples above do not include all medication names.

If you are unsure what medication you are taking or want to know more about what you are taking, please:

- ask your healthcare provider
- visit the Health Products Regulatory Authority website – [www.hpra.ie](http://www.hpra.ie)

## Should I see my healthcare provider again if I am prescribed this medication?

Yes. When psychotropic medications are started, it is likely that your healthcare provider will arrange a review after a short interval to check your response. Your healthcare provider should reassess your condition regularly. They do this to see if you still need the medication and if there are any side effects. Some patients use psychotropic medications long term and some do not.

At a review, your healthcare provider should let you know if you need to continue the medications and why. Contact your healthcare provider immediately if you think a medication is making you unwell.

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## Do I have to take these medications if they are prescribed?

You will be asked for your consent to take these medications if they are prescribed. Your consent to treatment is only valid when:

- You have the capacity to decide or have relevant decision support arrangements in place.
- You have received enough information in a way that you can understand it. This should include information on the benefits and risks of the treatment.
- You are making your own decision and are not being forced to consent by another person (under duress).

It may be helpful to include a family member or supporter in the treatment discussion and decision.



## Who can I ask for more information about these medications?

- Your healthcare provider
- Your GP or doctor
- Your specialist nurse therapist or specialist team
- Your public health nurse
- Your local memory service
- Your local pharmacist

You can also call the Alzheimer Society of Ireland freephone number on 1800 341 341 with any questions and to speak to someone for support.

Visit [www.understandtogether.ie](http://www.understandtogether.ie) for more information.

You can see more information on how your healthcare provider keeps up to date by visiting the Dementia Pathways website: [www.dementiapathways.ie](http://www.dementiapathways.ie)

## Sources of information for this leaflet

This leaflet was developed by adapting information from:

Title	Source
<b>Appropriate Prescribing of Psychotropic Medication for Non-cognitive Symptoms in People with Dementia (2019)</b>	Department of Health, Ireland
<b>How Antipsychotic Medications are Used to Help People with Dementia: A Guide for Residents, Family and Caregivers. (2019)</b>	Centre for Effective Practice, Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement
<b>Use of Antipsychotics in Behavioural and Psychological Symptoms of Dementia (BPSD) Discussion Guide: Long-Term Care (2016)</b>	Centre for Effective Practice, Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement
<b>Treating Disruptive Behaviour in People with Dementia: Antipsychotic drugs are usually not the best choice</b>	Choosing Wisely Canada



**This leaflet is supported by:**

- Health Service Executive
- Alzheimer Society of Ireland
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