

Providing the Best Care and Support Through the Appropriate Use Of Antipsychotics For People Living With Dementia

Guidance for People Living with Dementia and Care Partners

Antipsychotics:

- 1** Are not the best choice for reducing responsive behaviours
- 2** Can cause serious side effects
- 3** Can be deprescribed (under supervision), improving a person's quality of life and safety

Who should use this guide?

A person living with dementia or people who provide care or support for a person living with dementia

Dementia is the result when physical changes affect the brain. These changes can affect memory, thinking, mood, problem solving, and communication. A person living with dementia can become confused and depressed. Responsive behaviours* (e.g. agitation, resistance, shouting, or repeating actions) can be a reaction to the way a person feels about a change in environment, routine, or from an unmet need.

**Antipsychotics are sometimes used to treat responsive behaviours.
But, usually this is not the best choice. Here's why.**

*Responsive behaviours are also known as negative personal expressions, or behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD).

1. Antipsychotics are not the best choice for reducing responsive behaviours.

Supportive care that matches a person's preferences, habits and needs usually works best to decrease or stop responsive behaviours. Create a supportive environment by:

- Getting to know the person and things that make them feel safe and calm
- Providing supportive care, tailored to a person's needs, habits and preferences
- Investigating all possible causes of responsive behaviours to meet any unmet needs, including, but not limited to:



Discomfort

- Too hot, cold, itchy
- Hunger, thirst
- Elimination difficulty
- Fatigue



Medical/Biological

- Pain
- Dehydration, delirium, infection
- Disease progression
- Excessive medications/ combinations



Psychosocial

- Loneliness, depression
- Stress
- Relationship influences
- Language/cultural factors



Environmental

- Over/under stimulation
- Boredom
- Inconsistent routine, noise, lighting
- Provocation by others

Families and care providers have ideas about how to reduce responsive behaviours and help a person living with dementia feel calm, safe and happy. These are important to share.

2. Antipsychotics can cause serious side effects.

Side effects may vary based on dosage, type of antipsychotic, and the presence of underlying health conditions. Side effects can include:

- Drowsiness or mental confusion
- Weight gain, constipation, swelling, high blood sugar and high cholesterol
- Shaking or tremors
- Cardiovascular events such as stroke or heart attack
- Difficulty swallowing usually caused from over-sedation
- Increased risk for falls, fractures, hospitalization, stroke and death

3. Supervised deprescribing can improve a person's quality of life and safety.

The planned process of reducing or stopping antipsychotics that may no longer be of benefit or may be causing harm – deprescribing – can improve a person's quality of life and safety. Deprescribing is best done with the partnership of a health care provider; abruptly stopping any medication can be dangerous.

A plan to gradually deprescribe antipsychotics may be appropriate if the person is no longer experiencing benefit from the medication; is at risk of harm from the medication; and if safety risks associated with deprescribing are minimized. It's important to have supportive care strategies in place before deprescribing and observe behaviour during reductions to identify and address unmet needs.

Deprescribing antipsychotics does not typically increase responsive behaviours. In fact, personalized supportive care can reduce responsive behaviours.



Following appropriate deprescribing of antipsychotics, benefits for the person, family, and care providers can include:

- Decreased caregiver workload
- Improved quality of life
- Improved independence, mobility, alertness
- Improved connection with family
- Increased ability to socialize and participate in activities

Responsive behaviours and Unmet Needs

- Confusion
- Loneliness
- Depression
- Disruption of routine
- Medical need
- Resistance
- Pain
- Agitation

Positive Changes with Supportive care and Appropriate Deprescribing

- Safe & calm
- Individualized care
- Physical needs are met
- Individual routines
- Activity choices
- Socialization opportunities
- Preferences acknowledged
- Pain managed

Resources

- [How Antipsychotic Medications are Used to Help People with Dementia: A Guide for Residents, Families, and Caregivers](#). The Centre for Effective Practice and the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement created this resource to inform appropriate use of antipsychotics and person-centred approaches to care.
- [Deprescribing.org](#) tools to help patients and providers participate in deprescribing. Evidence-based deprescribing guidelines have been developed by or in collaboration with the Bruyère Research Institute for five classes of medications. Each guideline is accompanied by a decision-support algorithm, patient pamphlet, infographic and for some, a whiteboard video on how to use the algorithm.
- The [INESSS antipsychotic decision support tool](#).
- [Canadian Deprescribing Network resources](#), including patient handouts to empower people to take charge of their medications.
- [The Behavioural Supports Ontario Dementia Observational System](#). The BSO-DOS® is a direct observation tool that provides objective and measurable data about a person living with dementia. The data collected can be utilized by clinical teams and care partners to identify patterns, trends, contributing factors and modifiable variables associated with responsive behaviours/personal expressions. This information is useful in the development and evaluation of tailored, person-centred interventions to address unmet needs through activities, environments, approaches and/or medications.
- Alzheimer Society of Canada *All About Me* [booklet](#) and [conversation starter](#). A template that can be completed by a person living with dementia and their care partners to help inform personalized support and care. Sections of this booklet outline a person's usual habits, daily routines, likes and dislikes. This information will help new caregivers maintain the routines that provide a sense of security, comfort and pleasure.

References

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7. Alzheimer Society of Canada. (2014). PC P.E.A.R.L.S.™ 7 key elements of person-centred care of people with dementia in long-term care homes.

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