

Explaining the dangers associated with drug to drug interactions



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Picture an old-fashioned balance scale. When you take any medication, you place a box marked 'benefits' on one side, and weigh it against another box labelled 'risks'. Say you're a 50-year-old man with high cholesterol and blood pressure

whose doctor prescribes daily low-dose Aspirin. The hefty drop in heart attack risk far outweighs the slim chance the drug might trigger stomach bleeding.

Unfortunately, such calculations aren't so simple for people with schizophrenia. The problem comes down to predictability. Often, schizophrenia goes hand in hand with several other conditions that require drug therapy as well, and the greater the number of medications, the higher the odds they could interact in unexpected ways. However, you can maximize the benefits of treatment, while minimizing risks.

Before discussing how to do that, let's briefly go over those benefits. If you or someone you love has schizophrenia, you know the disordered thinking it causes can interfere with working, maintaining relationships and following healthy habits. Many affected individuals abuse alcohol or drugs.¹ The condition also increases the odds of ending up imprisoned or homeless,² and dying prematurely from suicide³, accidents⁴, and even respiratory infections.^{5,6} However, appropriate treatment can help people with the disorder lead full, productive lives.

Now let's look at the other side of the scale. Several factors can add unnecessary weight to the 'risk' box in unexpected ways. Sometimes, that shift in balance decreases the medication's effectiveness, making relapse more likely. Or it can cause unpleasant side effects, or aggravate another health problem. Happily, most of these things can be prevented with a little knowledge about how schizophrenia, associated conditions, and the drugs used to treat them can all interact.

Firstly, anti-schizophrenia medications can interact with other drugs. Take nicotine. Smoking speeds the break down of certain anti-psychotics by up to 30%⁷. This means the medications don't work as well or predictably as they should, and may not keep the disease in check.

Other drugs can cause certain anti-schizophrenia medications to build up in the blood, increasing the odds of side effects. For instance, when erythromycin is taken with a particular anti-schizophrenia drug, levels of the latter soar as much as 70%⁸, which can cause agitation, racing heartbeat and sometimes even death. Similarly, if a smoker taking a particular anti-schizophrenia medication gives up cigarettes, medication levels climb, which may lead to dizziness and constipation. These unpleasant effects can prompt people to stop treatment — greatly increasing the likelihood of relapse.

Sometimes, anti-schizophrenia medications also react with other, related conditions. For instance, schizophrenia doubles the odds of obesity and diabetes,^{9,10} both of which sharply increase heart attack risk. Some antipsychotics can further amplify those risks by causing weight gain or boosting levels of 'bad' cholesterol and triglycerides.¹¹ Hepatitis C is another example. Nearly 20% of people with schizophrenia are infected with the virus,¹² which poses a risk of liver damage. Because many medications (including most antipsychotics, alcohol, nicotine and caffeine) are broken down by this organ, they can further increase those chances by placing extra stress on the liver. However, the right therapy can minimize these risks, without sacrificing the benefits.

So how can you and your doctor choose a treatment that will provide dependable symptom control, while minimizing side effects?

Be up-front with your physician about habits like smoking, drinking coffee, or using drugs. If you drink alcohol, be honest about how much.

Make sure every doctor you see has a list of all your medications, including doses. Carry a duplicate in case you have to go to Emergency or a walk-in clinic. And fill all prescriptions at one drugstore, so the pharmacist can pick up potential drug/drug or drug/disease conflicts.

There are some anti-psychotic medications that are metabolized by the liver to a lesser degree than others that you may want to consider. This makes other conditions easier to manage, and decreases the chance other medications could upset the balance of anti-schizophrenia medication in your blood. That means you can spend less time thinking about your health, and more doing things you enjoy. After all, the goal isn't only treating your schizophrenia, but helping you live a happy, healthy life.

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