
Dystonia

Characteristics: Involuntary contractions of muscles due to some antipsychotics. Can include torticollis (twisting neck), opisthotonos (arching spine or neck), oculogyric crisis (eyes rolling back), and trismus (jaw clenching). Rare but serious is tongue swelling, which can block the airway or cause choking when eating.

Meds That Cause It: Antipsychotics, especially high-potency first-generation antipsychotics. May rarely occur with second-generation antipsychotics.

Mechanism: D2 blockade.

First-Line Medications (give these IM or IV if dystonia is severe):

- Benztropine (Cogentin) 1–2 mg once or twice per day (SE: Dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, urinary retention, and cognitive changes).
- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) 50 mg/day.
- If dystonia is severe, stop the offending drug, and give either of the above agents IM or IV once or twice to stop the dystonia. Then prescribe two to three days of the oral version to prevent another episode.

Second-Line Medications:

- Benzodiazepines (especially diazepam [Valium] 5–10 mg).
- Amantadine (Symmetrel) 100–200 mg BID (no injectable available).
- Trihexyphenidyl (Artane) 1–2 mg TID (no injectable available).

Clinical Pearls:

- Earliest of the extrapyramidal symptoms, with an onset of hours to days after antipsychotic is started or dose is increased; 90% of reactions occur within first five days.
- Risk factors include young male patients, high-potency first-generation antipsychotics, or high dose.
- Prophylaxis with anticholinergic agent for first month of treatment in those with high risk or previous history.
- May be very frightening and painful for the patient.
- Can occur in a tardive form, with symptoms lasting for greater than six months after discontinuation of the offending agent.

Fun Fact:

Dystonia has many causes other than antipsychotics, and it is the third most common movement disorder in the United States, following essential tremor and Parkinson's disease. Neurologists use botulinum toxin (Botox) to treat some dystonias, especially cervical dystonias.