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## How to Medicate Patients with Schizophrenia

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**Introduction** Your patients with schizophrenia won't all be alike – some will have prominent delusions and hallucinations while others might primarily display disorganized thinking and impaired social functioning. Regardless of a patient's presentation, medications help manage symptoms and improve their quality of life. Here we provide guidance on using medications to treat patients with schizophrenia.

**Identify Target Symptoms and Goals** Key therapeutic goals in treating schizophrenia include reducing or eliminating hallucinations and delusions; improving thought coherence and organization; enhancing emotional expression and social engagement; and increasing motivation and daily functioning.

### Medication Treatment

- **Antipsychotics**

- Choice will depend on a variety of factors, including what meds your patient has either responded to or failed in the past. There are dozens of options and all are effective; below are some of our top recommendations.
- Start with low side effect and affordable medications, which will usually be second generation antipsychotics, eg:
  - Aripiprazole (10-30 mg daily)—generally the most benign side effect profile though anecdotally less effective for some patients.
  - Risperidone (2-6 mg daily)—long track record, high EPS risk, moderate metabolic side effects, and long track record in schizophrenia treatment.
  - Paliperidone (6-12 mg daily)—similar profile as risperidone but often chosen as an initial agent because there are many long acting injectable (LAI) versions available.
  - Lurasidone (40-160 mg daily)—very well tolerated and has FDA approval for bipolar depression.
- Other SGAs to consider:
  - Olanzapine (5-20 mg daily)—high metabolic side effect burden but anecdotally more effective for treatment refractory patients.
  - Quetiapine (50-100 mg nightly and increase rapidly up to 600-800 mg daily)—high metabolic and sedation side effect burden but often helpful for agitation and insomnia and FDA approved for depression.
- First-Generation Antipsychotics (FGAs):
  - Haloperidol (2-20 mg daily)—high risk of EPS but good metabolic side effect profile, very inexpensive, and easily converted to LAI form.
  - Chlorpromazine (50-600 mg daily)—high risk of metabolic side effects but anecdotally very effective for agitated psychotic patients.
- **Adjunctive Medications:** Adding other medications can help treat concurrent symptoms, like:
  - Mood stabilizers (eg valproic acid 1500-3000 mg daily) for poor impulse control
  - Benzodiazepines (eg clonazepam 0.5-3 mg BID) for agitation or anxiety.
  - Antidepressants (eg sertraline 50-200 mg daily) for depressive symptoms.
- **Treatment-Resistant Schizophrenia Options:**
  - Clozapine – consider using for patients who have failed to respond to two different antipsychotics. Start with a low dose and titrate up and monitor for agranulocytosis.
  - Combination treatment, e.g. clozapine + aripiprazole, or Invega sustenna + quetiapine
- **Tips on Choosing Meds for Specific Patients:**
  - Obesity or diabetes? Avoid olanzapine, quetiapine, clozapine
  - History of EPS? Avoid aripiprazole and risperidone
  - At risk of osteoporosis (eg, underweight, female, age>50, smoker)? Avoid prolactin-elevating meds like risperidone, paliperidone, haloperidol; aripiprazole is a good choice
  - History of medication nonadherence? Choose a long-acting injectable.

- Ask about response of family members to specific drugs
- **Tips on Convincing Patients to Take Meds:**
  - Many patients with schizophrenia have poor insight into their condition and will tell you they don't need psychiatric medications. Refrain from challenging their delusions and try to validate their perspective while gently steering them toward accepting treatment.
    - "It sounds like you experience times that are really distressing. This medication can help lessen those times, making each day a bit easier to get through."
    - "I see that it's really important for you to maintain your independence and make sense of the world around you. This medication can help clear the fog, making it easier for you to think clearly"