

Learning Portal Lite: Mental health

This is a one-page summary; see the [full version online](#)

One in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year. Therefore as a pharmacist you are likely to be caring for patients with a mental health condition(s) wherever you are working. Common questions you may be asked include swapping and stopping psychiatric medicines, choosing medicines taking into account a patient's history and preferences, and managing side effects.

Swapping, stopping and restarting medicines

Medicines may need to be changed for a variety of reasons including lack of efficacy or adverse effects. **Swapping** between them can involve a balance of minimising the risk of a drug interaction while ensuring that the patient has adequate levels of drug on board during the period of changeover. Cross-tapering between two medicines can be helpful, but not always appropriate if the patient is suffering a serious side effect when a direct swap may be preferred.

Psychiatric medicines may need to be **stopped** for a range of reasons such as no longer being indicated or due to side effects, for example. However discontinuation symptoms can occur if they are stopped abruptly, especially if they have a short half-life, or lack active metabolites. Gradual dose reduction helps to reduce the risk. Some medicines may need to be **re-titrated upwards** if they have not been taken for some time (e.g. clozapine).

Choosing medicines

The diverse range of unwanted effects that psychiatric drugs can have, and their potential to interact with other medicines, means that the choice is not always straightforward. You will need to consider a patient's co-morbidities and their concomitant medicines carefully.

Managing side effects

Medicines used in mental health are particularly likely to be linked to groups of related adverse effects or syndromes rather than individual complaints (e.g. extrapyramidal side effects, serotonin syndrome). Some may have serious consequences and are mitigated by close monitoring (e.g. clozapine). Some may be less serious and resolve with simple interventions (e.g. increasing dietary fibre to ease constipation).

Questions to ask

The questions you need to ask will depend on the type of clinical problem, however if asked about choosing a medicine then a starting point is to

- Ask the prescriber what he or she would usually use and
- Find out whether the patient has tried anything before, and if it was effective/tolerated.

Information sources

These include The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines & Bazire's Psychotropic Drug Directory.