

# Health and Welfare Alert

## Psychotropic Medication Side Effects

### # 14-060-04



The purpose of this Alert is to provide critical information to caregivers on the side effects of psychotropic medications. Those providing care need to be aware of what to watch for and to take quick action when required. This Alert will provide some examples of side effects and how to respond if the person served exhibits them.

All DD Employees are required to be trained, annually, on identification and reporting of Major Unusual Incidents (MUIs) and Unusual Incidents (UIs) prior to direct contact. This training includes the review of any Health and Welfare Alerts released since the previous calendar year's training.

For questions or comments, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810. [www.dodd.ohio.gov](http://www.dodd.ohio.gov)

It is not unusual for individuals with developmental disabilities to also experience mental illness. This "dual diagnosis" condition is estimated to occur in 30 to 40 percent of people with developmental disabilities. The evaluation and treatment of dually-diagnosed individuals can greatly improve their lives, but side effects of treatment can occur. You need to be aware of and watch for all side effects, but especially ones which can be life-threatening.

Medications which are prescribed to improve a person's mental health or their behavior symptoms of mental illness are referred to as psychotropic medications.

**Anti-depressants, anti-psychotics, mood stabilizers, anti-anxiety agents, sleep agents, stimulants, anti-Parkinson and anti-cholinergic agents are such medications. If used for psychotropic purposes, anti-convulsants and cardiac medications are also considered psychotropics.**

An individual who is taking psychotropic medications may be unable to adequately express symptoms or side effects. Therefore observation for side effects is necessary. Side effects can come from a single medication or from the interaction of multiple medications and may be a result of a person's individual body chemistry rather than an overdose. Some side effects are minor, such as the sensation of thirst or increased need for fluids, constipation or weight gain. These side effects may be tolerated when the medication is effective in treating the mental illness. You should always be informed of the potential side effects of any medication before you consent to using it or administering it.

**If you see any of the following life-threatening side effects, seek medical attention immediately!**

- **Allergic reaction (difficulty breathing, swelling of lips/face/tongue, rash or fever).**
- **Change in level of alertness (excess sleepiness, insomnia, confusion or increased agitation).**
- **Onset of high fever, sweating or becoming flushed**
- **New or increased seizure activity**
- **Change in heartbeat (slow, fast, irregular) or blood pressure (high or low).**
- **Fainting or dizziness, especially with change in positions such as upon standing.**
- **Yellowing of eyes or skin.**
- **Abnormal movements, tremor or unsteady gait.**
- **Unusual bruising or bleeding.**
- **Prolonged nausea, vomiting, and weight loss.**
- **Muscle rigidity, fever, muscle cramps, confusion, sweating as in Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome**
- **Increased heart rate, shivering, sweats, dilated pupils, tremors, fever to 104 degrees as in Serotonin Syndrome**

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has adopted a “black-box label warning” for all medications that carry a risk of very serious side effects. Serotonin Syndrome, neuroleptic malignant Syndrome, SIADH, and prolongation of the QT interval are some of the life-threatening conditions which have resulted from these drugs. Most of the medications used as psychotropics have black box warnings. The label looks like the box below.

**This "black box" label is the strongest warning the FDA requires and appears on the medication label or in the literature describing it. Ask your doctor if the medication being prescribed has a black box warning. Read it and become familiar with the side effects it describes.**

The Center for Disease Control notes that each year in the United States, adverse drug events—injury resulting from the use of medication—result in more than 700,000 visits to hospital emergency departments. Many adverse drug events are preventable. Patients and caregivers can help reduce the risk of harm from medicines by learning about medication safety.



### Steps to Take:

- A. Be informed about black-box warnings and side effects of medications.**
- B. Assure medications are taken as prescribed (at prescribed times and dose).**
- C. Obtain immediate medical treatment for serious signs and symptoms.**
- D. Keep the health care provider and guardian alerted to side effects you see.**
- E. Be sure that all physicians are told which medications have been prescribed.**
- F. If someone is experiencing a life threatening side effect, call 911 immediately and provide CPR/FA until help arrives.**

## More Info

<http://dodd.ohio.gov/healthandsafety/Pages/Medication-Administration.aspx>

<http://www.cdc.gov/medicationsafety/>

[http://www.lanterman.org/uploads/Publication\\_30977\\_Psychotropic\\_Meds.pdf](http://www.lanterman.org/uploads/Publication_30977_Psychotropic_Meds.pdf)

### For Questions or Comments

For questions or comments regarding this alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit.

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