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Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



University
of Victoria

Canadian Institute for
Substance Use Research

learn about medications



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may be beneficial,
they can also be
harmful*

What are medications?

Medications are drugs manufactured to help people deal with a range of health issues. Some medications are psychoactive (mind altering) while others are not.

Some medications—for colds, flus, headaches and stomach aches—are sold over the counter and therefore do not require a prescription. Medications that are prescribed include the following:

- antibiotics (for bacterial infections)
- antidepressants (for depression)
- cardiovascular drugs (for heart disease)
- opiates (for pain)
- stimulants (for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)
- tranquilizers and sleeping pills (for stress, anxiety and sleeping problems)

Medications usually come as pills or tablets and are swallowed or administered as suppositories. Some medications come in liquid form and

can be injected. Other medications come in slips that fit under the tongue and dissolve in the mouth. Medications can be short-, medium-, or long-acting, referring to the length of time the drug affects the body.

Why do we use medications?

We use medications to relieve symptoms of medical conditions, to combat both short-term and chronic illness, and to manage our daily lives. While medications may be beneficial, they can also be harmful.

Using a medication to treat pain can be helpful. But over time, we may become tolerant to the drug and need an increasing amount to feel the positive effects. Some medications, such as tranquilizers, may help to relieve stress, but relying on a substance as a tool to ease tension can affect our health and relationships. And while using a medication as instructed or prescribed can help us manage our health, taking more than the recommended dosage can harm our health.

medications

What happens when we use medications?

Different medications affect the brain and body in different ways. For example, stimulant medications speed up activity in the central nervous system while depressant medications, such as tranquilizers, slow down activity in the brain. Pain medications block pain receptors in the brain, thereby decreasing the amount of pain felt. Antibiotics treat bacterial infections by killing the bacteria or preventing it from multiplying.

The way a particular form of medication affects us depends on more than just the type, dosage and method of administration. Other factors include our

- past experiences with the drug,
- present mood and circumstances,
- weight and age, and
- use (or non-use) of other drugs at the same time.

Health effects

When we think of medications, we normally think of them as tools for getting better. We may not be aware there can be harms as well as benefits. For instance, our doctor may prescribe a sleeping pill to help us get our sleeping pattern back on track. But after a few weeks of regular use, we may develop tolerance to the sleep-inducing effects and, if we continue to take higher doses, may find it hard to stop using the drug. Many medications can cause side effects. For instance, tranquilizers affect psychomotor coordination and, as a result, driving ability is impaired.

Medications can also have an impact on our social, school and work lives. For instance, if we combine alcohol with some medications such as tranquilizers, the effects of both drugs are increased. This can put us at risk of making

decisions that we may later regret such as having unprotected sex or driving before the effects have worn off. Some medications affect our ability to remember and learn things. This could impair our ability to do well in school or perform at work.

Some people use medications over the long term because they find the drugs helpful for managing ongoing health problems. For instance, a person may require cardiovascular drugs to control blood pressure or opiates to address chronic pain. But it is important to remember that making good decisions about using medications involves regular consultations with a healthcare professional and weighing the benefits and risks of continuing use.

Remember, not all bugs need drugs. Not all problems need drugs either. Other healthy ways to feel better include exercise, good diet and enough sleep.



medications

When is using medication a problem?

Using a medication is a problem when it negatively affects our life or the lives of others. For instance, it can be risky to use some medications for too long or in certain contexts, such as when drinking alcohol or when pregnant. What's important is to be aware of the potential benefits and harms related to using the medication in various contexts and over time.

A number of us, particularly those who are older, may be prescribed several medications. But when we mix some medications, we may be putting ourselves at risk of harm. Using an opiate and a sleeping pill, for example, can magnify the drowsiness effects of both drugs, potentially leading to harmful consequences such as becoming overly sedated.

Sometimes medications are used in ways not intended or prescribed. For instance, taking more than the recommended dosage, using someone else's prescription medication, and using medications for non-medical purposes are all risky. When we use medications in these ways, we are potentially putting ourselves at risk for adverse consequences.

One in four BC residents use psychoactive prescription medications

21%

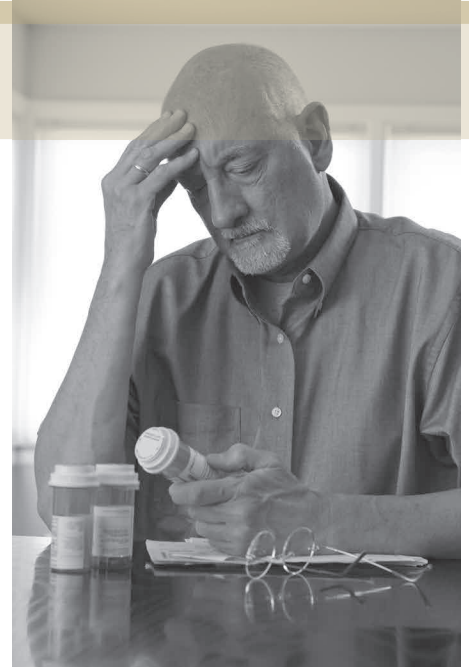
opiate pain relievers

10%

tranquilizers and sedatives

1%

stimulants



When using medications, carefully read the labels and any accompanying information. Discuss any concerns with your healthcare professional, and seek advice if you are considering no longer using a medication. People who stop using some medications after regular use can experience feelings of withdrawal, including irritability, loss of appetite and difficulty sleeping. These are usually temporary, but consult your healthcare provider if problems persist.

Mixing substances

People sometimes use more than one medication at a time or mix medications with other substances without realizing there is potential for harmful consequences. For example, someone may drink alcohol with an opiate painkiller without understanding that using these depressant drugs together can be

harmful. Some interactions may be minor, but others can be dangerous and possibly life threatening. The following are possible effects when drugs are combined.

- They may act independently of one another. For example, antibiotics do not seem to interfere with tranquilizers such as benzodiazepines (e.g., Valium and Ativan).
- They may increase each other's effects. For example, mixing opiates and tranquilizers (both slow the central nervous system) could result in reducing blood pressure and breathing rates to dangerous levels.
- They may decrease each other's intended effects. For instance, tobacco smoke interacts with some medications and people who smoke may require higher doses.

medications

How to make healthier choices about medications

Whenever we decide to use medications, it is helpful to know what steps we can take to ensure that our use results in the most benefit with the least harm. The following are some useful guidelines to follow.

Not too much. Always follow the dose instructions and remember that using more than one medication at a time may be risky.

Tip: Always ask your healthcare professional if there are other drugs (including alcohol) to avoid while using a particular medication.

Not too often. Using a drug more frequently than prescribed or for longer than recommended may be dangerous.

Tip: Check with your healthcare professional if you are not feeling the positive effects of a medication.

Only in safe contexts. Making informed decisions about situations where a medication may reduce your ability to function safely and responsibly helps to minimize harms.

Tip: Always read the label and other information provided with the medication. Check for warnings concerning the effects on physical and mental functioning (e.g., driving ability).

Are all medications legal?

All over-the-counter medications sold in reputable stores are legal. Prescription medications are legal when prescribed by an authorized healthcare professional. Using someone else's prescription or selling prescribed medication to other people is illegal.

What to do if you or someone you know is experiencing a problem with medications

For information about medications, health topics and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, visit HealthLink BC at www.healthlinkbc.ca. You can also call 811 from anywhere in British Columbia to speak with a nurse any time of the day or night about medication questions.

To better understand how substances play a role in your life, visit the **You and Substance Use Workbook** on the Here to Help website: www.heretohelp.bc.ca. This website also features detailed information on substances and mental health.

You can also find information about a wide variety of substance use issues on the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, website: cisur.ca.

