

# Psychotropic Polypharmacy: What is it and what can I do about it?

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## What is psychotropic polypharmacy?

Psychotropic medications are medicines used to treat mental health problems. "Psychotropic polypharmacy" means taking more than one mental health medication. This can mean:

- ✓ Taking two or more medications to treat the same mental health issue; or,
- ✓ Taking two or more mental health medications of the same type.

## What can I do about psychotropic polypharmacy?

If you are taking more than one mental health medication, talk to your doctor. Research shows that many people on polypharmacy can work with their doctor to cut back on the number of medications they take. The doctor might want to see you more often during the medication change to make sure you're feeling OK. If for some reason you start to feel worse, the doctor can add back the other medication.



Children and teenagers are more sensitive to medications. There is much less research on mental health medications for children, especially young children. If your child is on three or more mental health medications, talk to the doctor about the reason for each one. Make sure you know which side effects to look out for.



## Why do some people take more than one psychotropic medication?

There are many reasons why people take more than one mental health medication.

- ✓ Sometimes people are discharged from the hospital with more than one medication. The outpatient clinic doctor might not want to change the medications.
- ✓ Sometimes people have more than one doctor. Each doctor might prescribe medications without knowing what the other doctor is prescribing.
- ✓ Sometimes doctors switch medicines over time. They add a new one and slowly stop the old one.
- ✓ Sometimes people taking one medication are still bothered by symptoms. The doctor might prescribe another medication to help that person feel better.

### Why should I be concerned about psychotropic polypharmacy?

Taking more than one mental health medication can help some people feel better, but can also cause problems.



- ✓ The total dose of medicine might be more than you need.
- ✓ The medicines might have more side effects.
- ✓ The medicines might react with each other in ways that aren't good for your body.
- ✓ It can be difficult to remember how to take lots of different medicines, and may cost you more.
- ✓ It makes it harder to know which medicines are working and which aren't.

### What should I know about my medications?

Mental health medications should help you feel better and support your recovery goals. Talk to your doctor about the medicines you're taking. It's important to know:



- ✓ What each medicine is supposed to do;
- ✓ What side effects to look out for;
- ✓ When the medicine might no longer be needed; and,
- ✓ What the options are to cut back on the number of medications you're taking.

### How is OMH helping to reduce psychotropic polypharmacy?



The Office of Mental Health (OMH) is working with clinics around New York State to improve the quality and safety of medication treatments. As part of this project, OMH talked to a group of national experts including researchers, consumers, and family members. They identified several areas that

could make a real difference in improving your medication treatments. Psychotropic polypharmacy was one of the areas chosen for this project.

PSYCKES is a computer program developed by OMH. It is an important part of this quality improvement project. Clinics and doctors can use PSYCKES to see which consumers should get a treatment review. This can help make sure that you are getting good care.

For more information about psychotropic polypharmacy, OMH's quality improvement project, or PSYCKES, talk to your mental health provider or visit the PSYCKES homepage at <http://www.psyckes.org>