

OLANZAPINE ('Zyprexa')

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Why have I been prescribed olanzapine?

Olanzapine is used to treat schizophrenia, psychosis and similar conditions.

When they have schizophrenia, many people hear voices talking to them or about them. They may also become suspicious or paranoid. Some people also have problems with their thinking and feel that other people can read their thoughts. These are called "positive symptoms". Olanzapine can help to relieve these symptoms. Many people with schizophrenia also experience "negative symptoms". They feel tired and lacking in energy and may become quite inactive and withdrawn. Olanzapine may help relieve these symptoms as well.

Olanzapine is sometimes prescribed for people who have had bad side effects with older types of antipsychotics. Older medications – typical antipsychotics – often cause strange movements and shaking. Olanzapine does not usually cause these effects. Older drugs also increase levels of the hormone prolactin. This can cause a loss of sexual drive and impotence and have an effect on a woman's periods. Olanzapine seems not to cause these effects. Olanzapine is also used to help a number of other problems, such as mania, hypomania, mood disorders and some other conditions.

What exactly is olanzapine?

Olanzapine is one of a group of medicines used to treat schizophrenia and similar disorders. These illnesses are sometimes referred to as psychoses, hence the name given to this group of medicines which is the "antipsychotics". They are sometimes also called the neuroleptics or (incorrectly) major tranquillisers.

Olanzapine is a newer type of antipsychotic. It probably works in a different way and has different side effects to the older ones. Olanzapine has been available since 1996. It is often prescribed for people who have suffered bad side effects with the older antipsychotics. It may also work in some people where other antipsychotics have not helped very much or in people who have symptoms similar to depression (negative symptoms). The trade or brand name of olanzapine is 'Zyprexa'.

Is olanzapine safe to take?

It is usually safe to have olanzapine regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but it doesn't suit everyone. Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- a) if you have epilepsy, diabetes, glaucoma, or Parkinson's disease, or suffer from heart, prostate, kidney or liver trouble;
- b) if you are taking any other medication. This includes medicines from your pharmacist, such as antihistamines, or if you smoke heavily;
- c) if you are pregnant, breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant.

What is the usual dose of olanzapine?

The usual dose of olanzapine is between 10mg and 15mg a day, lower if you are older. The usual maximum dose of olanzapine is 20mg a day, although sometimes higher doses may be necessary.

How should I take my olanzapine?

Look at your medicine packet - it has your doctor's instructions on it. Follow these directions carefully. Always take your tablets with a full glass of water. Never be tempted to change the dose yourself. Normally medicines are supplied with an information leaflet for you to read.

What should I do if I forget to take a dose?

Never change your dose without checking with your doctor. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within a few hours of the usual time.

What will happen to me when I start taking my olanzapine?

Antipsychotics do not work straight away. For example, it may take several days or even weeks for some of the symptoms to reduce. To begin with, most people find that this medication will help them feel more relaxed and calm. Later, after one or two weeks, other symptoms should begin to improve.

Unfortunately, you might get some side effects before you start to feel any better. Most side effects should go away after a few weeks. Look at the table below. It tells you what to do if you get any of the usual side effects. Not everyone will get the side effects shown. There are many other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

Side effect	What is it?	What should I do if it happens to me?
COMMON		
DROWSINESS	Feeling sleepy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your olanzapine at a different time of the day.
WEIGHT GAIN	Eating more and putting on weight, especially just after you start the olanzapine.	Avoid fatty foods like chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks. A diet full of vegetables and fibre will usually help, as will physical activities such as walking. If it becomes a problem or you are worried, ask to see a dietician.
UNCOMMON		
CONSTIPATION	Feeling "bunged up" inside. You can't pass a motion or stool.	Eat more fibre e.g. bran, fruit and vegetables. Do more walking. Make sure you drink plenty of fluid. A mild laxative from a pharmacy might help.
DRY MOUTH	Not much saliva or spit.	Sugar-free boiled sweets, chewing gum or eating citrus fruits usually helps. If not, your doctor can give you a mouth spray. A change in medicine or dose may be possible.
PERIPHERAL OEDEMA	When your ankles swell up.	Discuss this with your doctor when you see them next.
POSTURAL HYPOTENSION	A low blood pressure. You may feel faint when you stand up.	Try not to stand up too quickly. If you feel dizzy, don't drive. This dizziness is not dangerous
RARE		
ALTERED LIVER FUNCTION	Your liver is not working as normal. You should not feel any symptoms. This is only discovered if your doctor does a blood test.	Continue to take your olanzapine. Your liver should return to normal after a while. Your doctor will probably want to do regular blood tests to make sure your liver is O.K. Serious liver problems don't occur with olanzapine, so don't worry too much.
PHOTOSENSITIVITY	Skin goes blotchy in the sun.	Avoid direct sunlight or sun-lamps. Use a high factor sun block cream.

What about alcohol?

It is officially recommended that people taking olanzapine should not drink alcohol. This is because both olanzapine and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken at the same time, severe drowsiness can occur. This can lead to falls or accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol often makes psychosis worse. Excessive drinking is especially likely to do this. Once people are used to taking medication, they can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm. **Avoid alcohol** altogether for the first one or two months. After this, if you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If this doesn't make you feel drowsy, then it is probably OK to drink small amounts. It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

Don't stop taking your olanzapine because you fancy a drink. Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Never drink any alcohol and drive.

When I feel better, can I stop taking it?

No. If you stop taking olanzapine, your original symptoms may return, but this may not be for 3 to 6 months after you stop the drug. You and your doctor should decide together when you can come off it. Most people need to be on olanzapine for quite a long time, sometimes years. This is not thought to be harmful. Olanzapine is not addictive.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may find other books or leaflets also useful. If you have access to the internet you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful, as internet based information is not always accurate.



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