

Learn about...

Medications

What are medications?

Medications are legal substances that people use to help them manage their daily lives. There are many kinds of medications available for treating different problems.

Some medications, including those for colds, flu, headaches and stomach aches, are sold over the counter. This means a doctor's prescription is not required to buy them.

Some medications are prescribed by a doctor. For example:

- **benzodiazepines** (e.g. Valium, Ativan, Xanax, Rohypnol) are prescribed to help people sleep, or to help them deal with stress, anxiety and other forms of mental or emotional suffering
- **opiates** (e.g. Codeine, Dilaudid, OxyContin, Percocet) are prescribed to help people deal with physical pain

Some medications are prescribed to treat very specific mental or physical health issues. For example:

- Fluoxetine (Prozac) and sertraline (Zolft) are anti-depressant drugs that are used to treat depression
- Methylphenidate (Ritalin) and dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine) are

stimulant drugs used to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

- Lithium carbonate and carbamazepine (Tegretol) are mood stabilizers used to treat bipolar disorder

Medications can be short-, medium-, or long-acting. This refers to the length of time a drug affects the body.

How do medications work?

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.

Different medications affect the brain and body in different ways. For example, stimulant medications speed up activity in the central nervous system. Depressant medications 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.



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Why do people use medications?

Most people in North America believe that using some kind of medication is the best way to deal with many mental and physical health problems. Indeed, some medications have made important contributions to the way we treat certain health problems. While there are alternatives—such as Oriental medicine, acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, etc.—the choice for many people is to see a doctor and often get a prescription. Older people, in particular, are regularly prescribed medications. Recently, however, some people have started to question whether we are over-prescribing to seniors and other groups.

It is interesting to note that Western culture decrees that medications are “good drugs” while illegal drugs such as cannabis and cocaine are “bad drugs.” Most people don’t realize that lots of drugs that are illegal today were legal in the past. In fact many, including cocaine and methamphetamine, were used by doctors to treat illnesses. The faith that many people put in medications is based on their legal status and promotion within the medical system. Increased health literacy is needed so people have access to knowledge about the effectiveness of a range of therapies, including drugs.

A lot of today’s legal medications are also used in ways not medically sanctioned. For example, some people misuse prescribed opiates or benzodiazepines by increasing the recommended dosage. In high doses both of these medications can produce feelings of extreme relaxation and sedation.

A recent trend in Canada, the US and other Western nations is to steal or borrow from other people’s prescriptions and sell the

substances to others who want to use the drugs for non-medical purposes. Many medications, including Ritalin, are available for sale by and for youth in schools and on the streets.

Some people use medications for criminal purposes. For example, the drug Flunitrazepam is well known as a date rape drug. This drug has been slipped into the drinks of unsuspecting women, who are later sexually assaulted. Most victims report having trouble remembering the people involved or the events themselves.

What are the risks and health effects of using medications?

The way a particular form of medication affects a person depends on the

- type of medication,
- dosage,
- person’s weight, age and mood,
- presence of symptoms, and
- method of administration.

Many medications can cause side effects, such as nausea, dry mouth and weight gain. Some side effects are more serious or risky than others, although most medications carry some risk if misused. Some medications can cause overdose and even death if used improperly.

While people with severe mental and physical problems may need life-long medical help, most medications are meant as temporary treatment for specific issues. If someone uses a medication for longer than they should, the substance can lose its effectiveness. They may need to take more of the medication in order for it to work properly. As well, they may experience headaches, stomach problems and depressive symptoms.

When is using medications a problem?

Whenever a person's use of medications negatively affects their life, or the lives of others, they have a problem.

Using medications can be dangerous when it involves

- **mixing substances.** Some combinations of medications with stimulant drugs (cocaine or amphetamines) or depressant drugs (alcohol) can double or triple the effects of the substances. A person may have a heart attack or fall into a coma. The risk of overdose and death is much higher.
- **pregnancy.** Babies born to mothers who used medications during pregnancy can develop learning and behavioural problems. However, some medications are deemed necessary and safe at certain dosages. Babies with large quantities of the drug in their system suffer from severe withdrawal symptoms.
- **operating a vehicle or engaging in other potentially hazardous activities.** Driving under the influence of any drug, including prescription medications used illegally, is dangerous and illegal. Improper use of a drug can impair a person's ability to drive carefully.

Over time, repeated use of higher and higher doses of medications can lead to dependence. This means a person mentally or physically feels that they need the medication to function in daily life. In some cases, dependence can create the opposite of the desired effects. For example, someone who uses benzodiazepines to soothe anxiety for a long time may become dependent and severely agitated when not taking the drug. In other words, they may become anxious about not taking their anxiety medication.

Fast facts about medication use in BC and Canada:

- British Columbians spend \$350 million on prescription drugs every year.
- The most commonly prescribed medications are those used to treat high blood pressure, depression and anxiety.
- Women are twice as likely as men to be prescribed benzodiazepines.
- Canada is the fifth largest consumer of opioids in the world and is the number one consumer of one particular kind of opioid, Oxycodone.
- In Canada, there are more people misusing prescription opioids than using heroin.

Are all medications legal?

All over-the-counter medicines are legal. Prescription medications are legal when prescribed by a doctor. Using someone else's prescription, or selling medication to other people, is illegal.

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

For information on treatment options and resources throughout British Columbia, call

Alcohol and Drug Information Referral Service

1-800-663-1441 (throughout BC)
604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver)

For information on ways to help yourself with a substance use problem, see the "Tips" section of the Here to Help website: www.heretohelp.bc.ca. The website also features detailed information on substances and mental health disorders.

You can also find information on a wide variety of substance use issues on the Centre for Addictions Research of BC website: www.carbc.ca.

