

## What do I need to know about anti-psychotic drugs?

Olanzapine is an example of an anti-psychotic drug. Other examples are haloperidol and risperidone. Anti-psychotic drugs reduce the distress and agitation caused by confusion, delusions (feeling certain about things that are not true) and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not really there). However, anti-psychotic drugs have the potential to cause side effects, so the person is carefully assessed by the medical team before and during any treatment.

Anti-psychotics cause drowsiness and can increase the risk of life-threatening infections like pneumonia, falls, strokes and blood clots. If used for long periods, there is a risk of worsening dementia, weight gain, diabetes and problems with stiff muscles and slow movement (Parkinsonism). To avoid side effects, anti-psychotic drugs like olanzapine are used in delirium in small doses, and only for a limited period of time, typically 3-5 days.

## What do I need to know about sedative drugs?

Lorazepam and diazepam are examples of sedative drugs. Sedative drugs are used for severe or dangerous agitation, when other efforts to calm someone have not worked. Sedatives are very calming and can make people very sleepy.

Sedatives can cause prolonged drowsiness, poor balance, falls, slurred speech, breathing difficulties, low blood pressure and amnesia (forgetting things). Sedatives sometimes make delirium worse rather than better, with increased aggression, or protracted confusion. To avoid side effects, sedatives are used in delirium in small doses and only when absolutely necessary.

## Information on Drugs used for Delirium in Hospital



**This leaflet contains information on the medicines sometimes used in hospital to treat acute confusion or delirium**

## What is delirium?

Delirium is a disorder of the brain. Delirium happens when people are medically unwell, or after an operation, and is much more common as people get older or more physically frail. Delirium is very common in people with dementia if they become medically unwell for any reason.

People with delirium are confused and find it difficult to concentrate. The confusion is new and out-of-the-ordinary for the person. They may be drowsy sometimes, and agitated or restless at other times. They may have delusions where they seem certain about things that are not true. They may have hallucinations, where they see or hear things that are not really there. The confusion may fluctuate across the course of a day, and can be worse in the evening or at night. Delirium may be more severe if the person has a high temperature, or is tired or uncomfortable. Delirium can be very distressing for the person and for their relatives and friends.

## How is delirium treated?

Delirium is usually triggered by a medical problem, like an infection, a heart attack, a stroke or after an operation. Treating this underlying problem is the best way to treat delirium. Sometimes people with delirium get very agitated and distressed. We know some things that can help: reassurance, a calm environment and good medical and nursing care. However, some people have such severe delirium that drugs might be considered as an additional measure to help reduce their distress or agitation.

## What can family, carers and friends do to help?

1. Fill out the Alzheimer's Society 'This Is Me' leaflet.
2. Sit with the person. The presence of a familiar person is very reassuring. This is especially helpful in the evening, when confusion often gets worse.
3. Be calm and use short, simple sentences. Listen to them and reassure them. Repeat things if necessary.
4. Remind them of what is happening and how they are doing. Remind them of the time and date. Make sure they can see a clock or a calendar.
5. Be available to help at mealtimes and help them to eat and drink. Drinking well helps to reduce delirium.
6. Bring in photos and familiar things from home.
7. Bring in their glasses and hearing aids.

## When are drugs used to help calm people with delirium?

Many drugs make delirium worse, so we usually avoid starting new medicines when someone has a delirium. However, there are times when drugs become necessary to sedate or calm someone. For example:

- To stop someone putting themselves or other people in danger
- To relieve distress when someone is dangerously agitated
- To calm someone enough for vital investigations or treatment

## Which drugs are used to help calm people with delirium?

The two main types of drug used in delirium are "anti-psychotics" and "sedatives". These drugs can be very helpful when other ways of relieving severe distress have not worked. However, all drugs can cause side effects, and sometimes these can be serious.