

# Pharmacotherapy management of schizophrenia for family physicians

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Canadian family physicians likely encounter 1 or 2 new patients per year with signs or symptoms of schizophrenia.<sup>1</sup> Although antipsychotic treatment of schizophrenia is generally the responsibility of a psychiatrist, family physicians play an important role in the long-term management of schizophrenia, including the management of antipsychotic adverse effects. Additionally, family physicians might initiate antipsychotic treatment for patients experiencing psychosis when immediate referral to a psychiatrist is not possible. Antipsychotic medications are the mainstay of schizophrenia management and attaining a stable medication regimen as soon as possible following diagnosis helps to prevent future disability.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, antipsychotic medication nonadherence and adverse effects are common in schizophrenia management, making the goal of attaining a stable medication regimen challenging to achieve. This article provides an overview of pharmacotherapy management of schizophrenia for family physicians through a case-based approach.

## Case description: part 1

K.W. is a 25-year-old woman who presents to your medical office with a family member. She describes visual hallucinations of snakes coming out of a lake. She also has a delusion that “someone put an aneurysm in her head by laying hands on her at her workplace.” K.W. has had these symptoms for the past month. Your electronic medical record tells you that 6 months ago, another physician in your clinic started K.W. on 15 mg of oral olanzapine once daily and referred her to a psychiatrist after she presented with suspected first-episode psychosis. K.W. states that the olanzapine caused excess sedation, so she stopped taking it. She did not follow up with the psychiatrist. She has no additional medical history and denies substance use. Collateral information from her family confirms that K.W. has never used substances.

## Adherence to antipsychotic medications

More than half of patients with schizophrenia are non-adherent to their psychotropic medications, and this increases their risk of hospitalization, disease progression, and death.<sup>3-6</sup> In a retrospective study of patients with schizophrenia, 35% of nonadherent patients had a psychiatric hospitalization compared with 14% of adherent patients (number needed to harm of 4 over 3 years).<sup>4</sup>

One way to reduce the risk of antipsychotic medication nonadherence is to maximize tolerability. Most antipsychotic adverse effects are dose related; thus,

avoiding overly rapid or premature dose escalations can improve tolerability.<sup>7</sup> This can be achieved by starting at low initial doses, such as those listed in **Table 1**,<sup>8-16</sup> and then increasing in increments equivalent to the initial dose.<sup>7</sup> To allow for assessment of tolerability and to avoid rapid dose escalations, the frequency of dose increases should depend on the duration of time a given antipsychotic takes to reach steady state.<sup>7</sup> For example, the initial suggested dose of aripiprazole for schizophrenia is 10 mg, and it takes 14 days of consecutive treatment for aripiprazole to reach steady state. Thus, an approach to aripiprazole initiation would be to start at 10 mg once daily for 2 weeks and then, if necessary, increase the dose by 10 mg at a time.

Most patients with first-episode psychosis respond well to approximately half the labeled maximum dose of an antipsychotic medication and dosing above the labeled maximum dose should only be done after specialist consultation.<sup>7</sup> This is important because the toxic range of antipsychotic medication is very close to the therapeutic range.<sup>17</sup> If patients do not demonstrate improvement while taking doses at or above the labeled maximum dose, the dose should be reduced and alternative antipsychotic therapy should be considered.<sup>7</sup> It might take as long as 2 to 4 weeks at a therapeutic antipsychotic dose for initial improvement in positive schizophrenia symptoms, such as delusions and hallucinations. An adequate antipsychotic medication trial is defined as 6 weeks of treatment with at least 80% of the labeled maximum dose.<sup>7</sup> Primary negative schizophrenia symptoms, such as avolition and anhedonia, are more challenging to treat and generally do not respond well to antipsychotic therapy.<sup>17</sup>

## Back to the case

K.W. was initially started on 15 mg of olanzapine once daily but did not tolerate it. An initial regimen of 5 mg of olanzapine once daily might have increased the likelihood of tolerability. After 1 week the dose could then have been increased to half the labeled maximum dose (10 mg daily) and response assessed after 2 to 4 weeks.

## Antipsychotic medication selection

As all antipsychotic medications have comparable efficacy (except for clozapine, which is the most effective antipsychotic medication for schizophrenia treatment), choosing initial therapy based on the adverse effect profile is another strategy to promote adherence.<sup>18-20</sup> For this reason, first-generation antipsychotic medications are not

**Table 1. Initial antipsychotic medication dosing and time to reach steady state: A) Selected oral SGAs and B) selected long-acting injectable SGAs.**

A)				
GENERIC NAME (BRAND NAME)	INITIAL DOSE <sup>8</sup>	LABELED MAXIMUM DOSE <sup>8</sup>	TIME TO STEADY STATE	COST RANGE (PER 30 d)
Risperidone (Risperdal)	1 mg once daily	6 mg/d	5 to 6 d <sup>9</sup>	\$25 to \$41
Paliperidone (Invega)	3 mg once daily	12 mg/d	4 to 5 d <sup>10</sup>	\$120 to \$230
Olanzapine (Zyprexa)	5 mg once daily	20 mg/d	7 d <sup>11</sup>	\$33 to \$55
Extended-release quetiapine (Seroquel XR)	50 mg once daily (antipsychotic effect generally not seen until dose is ≥ 400 mg)	800 mg/d	1 to 2 d <sup>12</sup>	\$57 to \$99*
Aripiprazole (Abilify)	10 mg once daily	30 mg/d	14 d <sup>13</sup>	\$45 to \$52
Brexipiprazole (Rexulti)	1 mg once daily	4 mg/d	20 d <sup>14</sup>	\$125
B)				
GENERIC NAME (BRAND NAME)	INITIAL DOSE AND REQUIREMENT OF ORAL OVERLAP <sup>8</sup>	LABELED MAXIMUM DOSE <sup>8</sup>	TIME TO STEADY STATE	COST RANGE (PER 30 d)
Once-monthly paliperidone (Invega Sustenna)	Day 1: 150 mg IM Day 8: 100 mg IM Then 75 mg IM every 4 wk No oral overlap needed	150 mg IM every 4 wk	4 to 5 mo <sup>15</sup>	\$330 to \$665
Risperidone (Risperdal Consta)	25 mg IM every 2 wk with 3 wk of oral risperidone overlap	50 mg IM every 2 wk	2 mo <sup>9</sup>	\$368 to \$708
Aripiprazole (Abilify Maintena)	400 mg IM every 4 wk with 2 wk of oral aripiprazole overlap	400 mg IM every 4 wk	4 mo <sup>16</sup>	\$483

IM—intramuscular, SGA—second-generation antipsychotic medication.  
\*Immediate-release formulation is less costly, but requires twice-daily to 3-times-daily dosing, which is challenging for adherence.

usually recommended as first-line therapy, as they have higher discontinuation rates compared with second-generation antipsychotic medications (SGAs) owing to increased rates of extrapyramidal symptoms (EPS).<sup>20,21</sup> For example, in a 6-week study of patients after their first episode of psychosis, 8% of patients treated with risperidone withdrew due to adverse effects compared with 26% of patients treated with haloperidol.<sup>22</sup>

Antipsychotic medications differ substantially in their relative rates of EPS, weight gain, hyperprolactinemia, sedation, orthostatic hypotension, sexual dysfunction, and anticholinergic effects.<sup>8,18</sup> Clinicians might consider using a shared decision-making approach to select an antipsychotic medication that has the most acceptable adverse effect profile for each patient.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 2** describes suggested management of SGA adverse effects.<sup>7,8,18,23-25</sup> In general, options for managing adverse effects include lowering the antipsychotic dose, changing administration times, using adjunctive medications, or switching to an alternate antipsychotic medication.<sup>7</sup>

### Back to the case

From your assessment of K.W.'s current clinical

presentation, you deem it appropriate for her to be admitted to an acute care facility for inpatient psychiatry treatment. On the inpatient psychiatry ward, she is diagnosed with schizophrenia and receives inpatient treatment for 1 month. She is discharged, taking 3 mg of risperidone orally at night and 150 mg of paliperidone intramuscularly every 4 weeks.

### Long-acting injectable antipsychotic medications (LAIAs)

Long-acting injectable antipsychotic medications should be considered early in the course of schizophrenia to attempt to improve adherence.<sup>26</sup> For example, in the PRIDE (Paliperidone Palmitate Research in Demonstrating Effectiveness) study, 450 patients with schizophrenia were randomized to oral antipsychotic medications or a once-monthly paliperidone injection. After 15 months, treatment failure was 39.8% in the paliperidone injection group and 53.7% in the oral antipsychotic group (number needed to treat of 7).<sup>27</sup> Additionally, observational data of LAIA use in schizophrenia demonstrate a 20% to 30% reduction in risk of rehospitalization compared with oral antipsychotic medications.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, LAIAs are typically much more expensive than oral agents are (eg, around \$40 per month for oral risperidone vs around \$400 per month for injectable risperidone) and drug coverage can be a challenge. Further, injection site reactions occur in up to 10% of patients.<sup>15</sup> However, the cost savings of reduced hospitalizations with LAIAs might offset the overall cost to the health care system.<sup>29</sup> If possible, patients should be involved in a shared decision-making process regarding the use of oral versus injectable antipsychotic treatment.

Before initiation of a LAIA, tolerability with the oral equivalent must be established.<sup>8</sup> **Table 1** describes the overlap time required between oral antipsychotic medications and LAIAs.<sup>8-16</sup>

### Case description: part 2

Four months after her discharge from the hospital, K.W. presents back to your office. She has been adherent to the risperidone and paliperidone prescribed in hospital. She has had no hallucinations, delusions, or paranoid thoughts since being discharged from hospital and she is managing well at home. She denies sexual dysfunction, anticholinergic adverse effects, or sedation. You assess her for EPS using the Simpson Angus Scale. On the Simpson Angus Scale, she scores a 2 on the gait criterion owing to noticeably decreased left arm swing with obvious rigidity.

### Management of EPS

Extrapyramidal symptoms are a constellation of movement disorders that occur secondary to the use of dopamine receptor blocking agents such as antipsychotic medications.<sup>8</sup> One strategy to reduce the risk of EPS is to use the lowest effective antipsychotic dose (**Table 1**).<sup>8-16</sup>

The 4 main types of EPS, in order of typical onset, are as follows:

- acute dystonic reactions (usually occur within the first 2 weeks of treatment),<sup>8</sup>
- akathisia (usually begins within 2 to 4 weeks of treatment),<sup>8</sup>
- pseudoparkinsonism (usually seen within 3 to 6 weeks of treatment initiation but might also occur any time after),<sup>8</sup> and
- tardive dyskinesia (usually not seen until 3 months after treatment initiation).<sup>8</sup>

The goals of EPS treatment include resolution of symptoms and prevention of tardive dyskinesia. Although EPS occurs less frequently with SGAs compared with first-generation agents (aside from the higher incidence of akathisia with aripiprazole), EPS is still a concern with SGA use.<sup>30,31</sup> For example, it is reported that 7.2% of patients who receive a long-acting risperidone injection will develop an acute dystonic reaction.<sup>32</sup> Risk factors for EPS include the type of antipsychotic medication, high doses of antipsychotic medication, and

history of previous EPS.<sup>30,31</sup> **Table 2** presents strategies to treat EPS.<sup>7,8,18,23-25</sup>

### Case resolution

K.W. appears to have pseudoparkinsonism secondary to her antipsychotic regimen. She is currently taking 2 antipsychotic medications. Dual antipsychotic therapy can be appropriate when starting a long-acting injection to provide a temporary bridge until LAIA onset; however, long-acting injectable paliperidone is unique in that it is the only LAIA that does not require oral overlap on initiation. Additionally, long-acting injectable paliperidone achieves steady state in 4 to 5 months; thus, K.W. would now be at steady state levels. You recognize that she is taking the labeled maximum dose of long-acting injectable paliperidone despite this being her first time taking an antipsychotic consistently. She is responding well but the EPS she is experiencing are concerning. In consultation with her psychiatrist, you stop the risperidone, as it was unintentionally continued on hospital discharge, and decrease her dose of paliperidone to 100 mg every 4 weeks. Two months later you check in with K.W. and find that her EPS have resolved, and her schizophrenia remains controlled.

### Switching antipsychotic medications

If K.W.'s pseudoparkinsonism had not improved, she might have needed to switch antipsychotic medications. Caution is required when switching antipsychotic medications to minimize the risk of a relapse and withdrawal symptoms. A crossover rotation approach is usually recommended, wherein the first medication is tapered down while the second medication is simultaneously titrated up. This process usually occurs over a minimum of 2 to 4 weeks for oral antipsychotic therapy. Switching LAIAs is more complex and the product monograph for the specific antipsychotic agents should be reviewed. A useful resource for cross-tapering can be found at [www.switchrx.com](http://www.switchrx.com). When considering switching, it is important to first consider confounding factors for nonresponse including nonadherence, substance use, and interactions between medications and substances (eg, cigarette smoking) that might alter antipsychotic pharmacokinetics.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

Treating patients living with schizophrenia is a complex task, as exemplified by K.W.'s case. Early intervention has a substantial effect on the long-term outcomes, and appropriate use of antipsychotic medications is the cornerstone of the management of schizophrenia.<sup>2</sup> It is important to consider the adverse effect profile, dosing, and patient preference when selecting a medication for schizophrenia treatment. Adherence to treatment is imperative in reducing the risk of psychotic relapse and, for this reason, LAIAs should be considered early in

**Table 2. Antipsychotic medication adverse effects, monitoring, and management**

ADVERSE DRUG EFFECT	MOST LIKELY CAUSATIVE SGA <sup>8,18</sup>	ASSESSMENT TOOLS	SCHEDULE FOR MONITORING <sup>23</sup>	MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES <sup>7,8,23</sup>
Sedation	Olanzapine Clozapine Quetiapine	NA	Baseline and at each visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change administration time to before bedtime</li> <li>• Slow down the titration if in titration phase</li> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as risperidone, paliperidone, aripiprazole, or brexpiprazole</li> </ul>
Anticholinergic effects (eg, xerostomia, constipation, dry eyes)	Clozapine Quetiapine	NA	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Add an adjunctive medication based on symptom†</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as risperidone, paliperidone, aripiprazole, or brexpiprazole</li> </ul>
Orthostatic hypotension	Clozapine Quetiapine Olanzapine	Orthostatic blood pressure monitoring	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change administration time to before bed</li> <li>• Slow down the titration if in titration phase</li> <li>• Nonpharmacologic measures: get up slowly, increase fluids. If other strategies are ineffective, can try medications such as midodrine or fludrocortisone<sup>24</sup></li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as risperidone, paliperidone, aripiprazole, or brexpiprazole</li> </ul>
Sexual dysfunction	Olanzapine Quetiapine Risperidone Paliperidone	NA	Baseline, during titration, and annually thereafter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Can wait 1 to 3 mo to assess for tolerance</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as aripiprazole or brexpiprazole</li> <li>• Adjunctive medication based on symptom‡</li> </ul>
Metabolic effects (eg, weight gain, dyslipidemia, glucose intolerance)	Olanzapine Clozapine Quetiapine	Weight, BMI, fasting blood glucose level, hemoglobin A <sub>1c</sub> level, lipid panel	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour modification (diet, exercise)</li> <li>• Add 850 to 1000 mg metformin twice daily</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as risperidone, paliperidone, aripiprazole, or brexpiprazole</li> </ul>
Hyperprolactinemia	Risperidone Paliperidone	Prolactin levels	If symptoms of hyperprolactinemia are present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as aripiprazole or brexpiprazole</li> <li>• Add 3 to 6 mg/d adjunctive aripiprazole<sup>§</sup></li> </ul>
Acute dystonia (sudden muscle contraction)	Risperidone Paliperidone	Simpson-Angus Scale <sup>¶</sup>	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Use IM benztropine or diphenhydramine for shortest duration possible</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as aripiprazole, olanzapine, quetiapine, or brexpiprazole</li> </ul>
Pseudoparkinsonism (eg, tremor, cogwheel rigidity, shuffling gait)	Risperidone Paliperidone	Simpson-Angus Scale <sup>¶</sup>	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as quetiapine, aripiprazole, brexpiprazole, or clozapine</li> <li>• Add 0.5 to 2 mg oral benztropine daily to twice daily for the shortest duration possible</li> </ul>
Akathisia (inner feeling of restlessness)	Aripiprazole Olanzapine Risperidone	Barnes Akathisia Rating Scale	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower the dose (if appropriate)</li> <li>• Switch to an alternative such as quetiapine or paliperidone</li> <li>• Add 10 to 20 mg oral propranolol 3 times daily</li> </ul>
Tardive dyskinesia (involuntary repetitive muscle movement usually involving orofacial muscles)	Risperidone Paliperidone	Abnormal Involuntary Movement Scale	Standard monitoring schedule*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slowly taper off the causal antipsychotic medication, as tardive dyskinesia can be irreversible, and switch to clozapine or quetiapine (less risk of tardive dyskinesia)</li> <li>• Add tetrabenazine</li> </ul>

BMI—body mass index, IM—intramuscular, NA—not applicable, SGA—second-generation antipsychotic medication.


\*Baseline, every 1 to 2 wk during titration, at 3 mo, and annually thereafter.

†For example, laxatives can be used for constipation or artificial saliva can be used for dry mouth.

‡For example, phosphodiesterase 4 inhibitors can be used for erectile dysfunction.

§Partial agonist activity of aripiprazole overcomes D<sub>2</sub> blockade—induced hyperprolactinemia in the tuberoinfundibular pathway.<sup>25</sup>

¶Available from [https://wbma.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Simpson\\_Angus\\_scale.pdf](https://wbma.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Simpson_Angus_scale.pdf).

schizophrenia management. Initiation of LAIAs requires confirmation of oral antipsychotic tolerability and an appropriate period of overlap with oral antipsychotic medications. Prescribers of antipsychotic medications should monitor for adverse drug effects continuously, with more rigorous monitoring at times of antipsychotic initiation or dose changes. Monitoring should include assessment of symptom improvement, sedation, metabolic status, EPS, sexual dysfunction, and hyperprolactinemia. Early identification and management of these adverse effects can promote adherence and thereby decrease the risk of psychotic episodes and hospitalizations. 

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