

‘Typical’ or ‘atypical’ – which sort of drug is best after a first episode of psychosis?

Is it better to prescribe ‘atypical’ or ‘typical’ antipsychotic medication to someone who has experienced a first episode of psychosis?

A research team at the Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London, has found that both types of medication work equally well for people who have experienced psychosis for the first time.

But the researchers found differences between the side effects caused by the two types of medication.

People who had had a first episode and were prescribed atypical medication were more likely to gain weight, while people who were prescribed typical medication were more likely to have some sort of ‘movement disorder’, referred to by health professionals as ‘extrapyramidal symptoms’. These are similar to the symptoms of Parkinson’s disease and include slow movements and a tremor, or a sense of inner restlessness that makes it hard for people to sit still.

The research team had analysed the results of 15 randomised controlled trials that had previously been carried out to test the effectiveness of different antipsychotic drugs.

Their analysis showed that a large number of people respond well to a low dose of both typical (conventional, ‘first generation’) and atypical (‘second generation’) drugs after a first episode of psychosis.

They therefore conclude that because both types of antipsychotics are equally effective at treating symptoms, the likely side effects should be taken into consideration when choosing which drug to prescribe. It is better to prescribe a medication that is likely to have less side effects when people first become ill, they say, particularly as unpleasant side effects may put people off taking antipsychotic drugs in the longer term.

Other side effects of antipsychotic medication – like diabetes or tardive dyskinesia – usually appear after years of taking the drugs.

The research team’s analysis did not look at whether there was a difference in relapse rates between people prescribed typical drugs and people prescribed atypical drugs after a first episode.

Efficacy of atypical v. typical antipsychotics in the treatment of early psychosis: meta-analysis. Nicolas A Crossley, Miguel Constante, Philip McGuire and Paddy Power, The British Journal of Psychiatry, 2010, 196, 434-439.

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