

Medications: Quick Reference

Plain-English definitions for every medications term on Shrinktionary, in one printable sheet.

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Created and reviewed under the direction of Shariq Refai, MD, MBA, FAPA, a board certified psychiatrist.

Please read

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Akathisia

Also: Inner restlessness

Akathisia is a distressing sense of inner restlessness, often with a strong urge to keep moving. It's a side effect that can come from certain psychiatric medications and warrants prompt attention.

Alprazolam (Xanax)

Also: Xanax

Alprazolam is a fast-acting benzodiazepine, sold as Xanax, used for anxiety and panic. It works within minutes, which is both why people rely on it and why it's meant for short-term use.

Amitriptyline (Elavil)

Also: Elavil

Amitriptyline is an older tricyclic antidepressant, sold as Elavil. It's now used mostly off-label at low doses for sleep and for chronic pain, because its side effects are heavy.

Amphetamine (Adderall)

Also: Adderall, dextroamphetamine

Amphetamine is a stimulant medication for ADHD, sold as Adderall. It's one of the two main stimulant families, and it's a controlled substance.

Anticholinergic

Also: anticholinergic effects, anticholinergic burden

Anticholinergic describes a medication effect that blocks acetylcholine, a chemical messenger. It's the reason a drug can cause dry mouth, constipation, blurry vision, and foggy thinking.

Antidepressant

Also: depression medication

An antidepressant is a medication used to treat depression and many anxiety conditions. It's an umbrella term that covers several drug classes, including SSRIs and SNRIs.

Antipsychotic

Also: neuroleptic

An antipsychotic is a medication used to treat psychosis and to help manage bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Some are also added to other treatments to boost their effect.

Anxiolytic

Also: anti-anxiety medication

An anxiolytic is a medication used to reduce anxiety. The word covers several very different drugs, from fast-acting benzodiazepines to daily medications that take weeks to work.

Aripiprazole (Abilify)

Also: Abilify

Aripiprazole is an atypical antipsychotic, sold as Abilify, used for bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and as an add-on for depression that hasn't responded to an antidepressant alone.

Atomoxetine (Strattera)

Also: Strattera

Atomoxetine is a non-stimulant medication for ADHD, sold as Strattera. It's taken daily, it takes weeks to work, and it isn't a controlled substance.

Atypical Antidepressant

Also: Other antidepressant

An atypical antidepressant is a medication that treats depression but doesn't fit neatly into the older drug classes like SSRIs or tricyclics. These medications work through different chemical pathways in the brain.

Augmentation

Also: Add-on therapy, Adjunctive treatment

Augmentation is the practice of adding a second medication to boost the effect of one that's only partly working. It's a way to improve a treatment without abandoning a drug that's helping a little.

Benzodiazepine

Also: Benzos

Benzodiazepines are a class of fast-acting medications that calm the nervous system. They can quickly ease anxiety, panic, and insomnia, but carry a risk of dependence and are usually meant for short-term use.

Beta-Blocker

Also: Beta blocker, Beta-adrenergic blocker

Beta-blockers are medications first developed for heart and blood pressure problems. In mental health they're sometimes used off-label to calm physical anxiety symptoms like a racing heart or shaky hands.

Black Box Warning

Also: Boxed warning, Black-box warning

A black box warning is the strongest safety warning the FDA can put on a medication. It flags a serious possible risk, but it doesn't mean the drug is banned or that the risk happens to everyone.

Bupropion (Wellbutrin)

Also: Wellbutrin, Zyban

Bupropion is an atypical antidepressant, sold as Wellbutrin, that works on norepinephrine and dopamine instead of serotonin. It's also used to help people stop smoking.

Buspirone (BuSpar)

Also: BuSpar

Buspirone is a daily anti-anxiety medication, sold as BuSpar, used for generalized anxiety. It isn't sedating and isn't habit-forming, but it takes weeks to work.

Citalopram (Celexa)

Also: Celexa

Citalopram is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Celexa, used mainly for depression. It's closely related to escitalopram, which is a frequent source of mix-ups.

Clonazepam (Klonopin)

Also: Klonopin

Clonazepam is a long-acting benzodiazepine, sold as Klonopin, used for panic disorder and some seizure conditions. It lasts longer than most others in its class.

Controlled substance

Also: scheduled drug

A controlled substance is a medication the government regulates more tightly because it carries a risk of misuse or dependence. It affects how it's prescribed and refilled, not whether it's legitimate.

Desvenlafaxine (Pristiq)

Also: Pristiq

Desvenlafaxine is an SNRI antidepressant, sold as Pristiq. It's the active form your body converts venlafaxine into, which is why the two are so closely related.

Diazepam (Valium)

Also: Valium

Diazepam is a long-acting benzodiazepine, sold as Valium, used for anxiety, muscle spasm, seizures, and alcohol withdrawal. It's the oldest name most people recognize in the class.

Discontinuation syndrome

Also: Antidepressant discontinuation syndrome

Discontinuation syndrome is the set of temporary symptoms that can appear when an antidepressant is stopped too quickly. It isn't addiction, and it's usually prevented by tapering the dose gradually with a prescriber.

Doxepin (Silenor)

Also: Silenor

Doxepin is a tricyclic antidepressant that, at very low doses, is used as a non-habit-forming sleep medication for staying asleep. The dose is what changes what it does.

Drug interaction

Also: drug-drug interaction

A drug interaction is when one substance changes how another one works in the body. It can make a medication stronger, weaker, or riskier, and it isn't always intuitive.

Duloxetine (Cymbalta)

Also: Cymbalta

Duloxetine is an SNRI antidepressant, sold as Cymbalta. It's used for depression and anxiety, and also for several chronic pain conditions, which is unusual for an antidepressant.

Escitalopram (Lexapro)

Also: Lexapro

Escitalopram is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Lexapro, used for depression and generalized anxiety disorder. It's often chosen as a starting point because it tends to be well tolerated.

Eszopiclone (Lunesta)

Also: Lunesta

Eszopiclone is a Z-drug, sold as Lunesta, that helps with both falling asleep and staying asleep. It's known for leaving a distinctive bitter taste in the mouth.

First-line treatment

Also: first-line, front-line treatment

A first-line treatment is the one usually tried first for a condition, because the balance of evidence, effectiveness, and safety puts it there. It isn't the same as the best treatment for you.

Fluoxetine (Prozac)

Also: Prozac

Fluoxetine is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Prozac, used for depression, OCD, panic, and bulimia. It's known for an unusually long half-life, which means it leaves the body slowly.

Generic drug

Also: generic, generic medication

A generic drug is a medication sold under its chemical name rather than a brand name. It contains the same active ingredient as the brand and has to meet the same FDA standards, usually at a much lower price.

Guanfacine (Intuniv)

Also: Intuniv, Tenex

Guanfacine is a non-stimulant ADHD medication, sold as Intuniv. It's often used on its own or added to a stimulant, and it can help with the irritability and emotional flare-ups that come with ADHD.

Half-Life

Also: Elimination half-life

Half-life is the time it takes for the amount of a drug in your body to drop by half. It helps explain how often a medication is taken and how long it lingers after the last dose.

Hydroxyzine (Vistaril)

Also: Vistaril, Atarax

Hydroxyzine is an antihistamine, sold as Vistaril or Atarax, used for anxiety. It works fairly quickly and carries no dependence risk, which is why it's used as a benzodiazepine alternative.

Lamotrigine (Lamictal)

Also: Lamictal

Lamotrigine is a mood stabilizer, sold as Lamictal, used mainly to prevent the depressive episodes of bipolar disorder. It has to be started slowly because of a rare but serious rash.

Lisdexamfetamine (Vyvanse)

Also: Vyvanse

Lisdexamfetamine is a long-acting stimulant for ADHD, sold as Vyvanse. It's inactive until the body converts it, which gives it a smoother, longer effect. It's also approved for binge eating disorder.

Lithium

Also: lithium carbonate

Lithium is a foundational mood stabilizer used to treat bipolar disorder. It needs regular blood monitoring, and the dose should never be adjusted on your own.

Lorazepam (Ativan)

Also: Ativan

Lorazepam is a benzodiazepine, sold as Ativan, used for anxiety. Like others in its class, it's meant mainly for short-term or occasional use.

Maintenance treatment

Also: maintenance phase, maintenance therapy

Maintenance treatment is staying on a treatment after you've gotten better, to keep the illness from coming back. It's the phase people are most tempted to quit.

MAOI

Also: Monoamine oxidase inhibitor, MAOIs

MAOI stands for monoamine oxidase inhibitor, one of the oldest classes of antidepressant. They can work well, but they require careful attention to diet and drug interactions, so they're usually reserved for when other treatments fail.

Medication adherence

Also: adherence, compliance

Medication adherence is how closely someone actually takes a medication the way it was prescribed. Most people are imperfect at it, and the reasons are usually practical rather than stubborn.

Methylphenidate (Ritalin, Concerta)

Also: Ritalin, Concerta

Methylphenidate is a stimulant medication for ADHD, sold as Ritalin and Concerta. It's the other main stimulant family alongside amphetamine.

Mirtazapine (Remeron)

Also: Remeron

Mirtazapine is an atypical antidepressant, sold as Remeron, often chosen when depression comes with poor sleep and lost appetite. It tends to be sedating and to increase appetite.

Mood Stabilizer

Also: mood-stabilizing medication

A mood stabilizer is a medication used mainly in bipolar disorder to even out the highs and lows. Lithium is one of the best-known examples.

NDRI

Also: norepinephrine-dopamine reuptake inhibitor

NDRI stands for norepinephrine-dopamine reuptake inhibitor. It's a small antidepressant class, best known for bupropion, that works on norepinephrine and dopamine instead of serotonin.

Off-Label

Also: Off-label use, Off-label prescribing

Off-label means a doctor prescribes an approved medication for a use the FDA hasn't formally approved. It's common, legal, and often backed by real evidence and clinical experience.

Paroxetine (Paxil)

Also: Paxil

Paroxetine is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Paxil, used for depression and a wide range of anxiety disorders. It's the SSRI most associated with difficult discontinuation.

Physical dependence

Also: dependence, physiological dependence

Physical dependence is when the body has adapted to a medication so that stopping it suddenly causes withdrawal symptoms. It can happen with medication taken exactly as prescribed, and it isn't the same as addiction.

Polypharmacy

Also: Multiple medications

Polypharmacy means taking several medications at the same time. In mental health it usually refers to using more than one psychiatric drug together, which can help but also needs careful oversight.

Propranolol (Inderal)

Also: Inderal

Propranolol is a beta blocker, a heart medication used off-label for the physical symptoms of situational anxiety, like a pounding heart and shaking hands before a performance.

Psychotropic

Also: psychotropic medication, psychiatric medication

Psychotropic is the umbrella word for any medication that acts on the brain to affect mood, thinking, or behavior. It's a category, not a specific drug.

Quetiapine (Seroquel)

Also: Seroquel

Quetiapine is an atypical antipsychotic, sold as Seroquel, used for bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and as an add-on for depression. At low doses it's often prescribed off-label for sleep.

Ramelteon (Rozerem)

Also: Rozerem

Ramelteon is a sleep medication, sold as Rozerem, that works on the body clock rather than sedating the brain. It isn't habit-forming and isn't a controlled substance.

Serotonin Syndrome

Also: Serotonin toxicity

Serotonin syndrome is a potentially serious reaction caused by too much serotonin activity in the body, often from combining certain medications. It can range from mild to life-threatening and needs prompt medical attention.

Sertraline (Zoloft)

Also: Zoloft

Sertraline is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Zoloft. It's one of the most widely prescribed psychiatric medications, used for depression, anxiety, panic, OCD, PTSD, and PMDD.

SNRI

Also: Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor

SNRI stands for serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor. It's a class of antidepressant medications that adjust two brain chemicals at once and is used for depression, anxiety, and some pain conditions.

SSRI

Also: Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor

SSRI stands for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. It's a class of medications used to treat depression, anxiety disorders, OCD, PTSD, and several other conditions by adjusting how serotonin moves between nerve cells.

Stimulant

Also: ADHD stimulant medication

A stimulant is a medication that's a first-line treatment for ADHD. It helps with focus and impulse control and is a controlled substance managed closely by a prescriber.

Suvorexant (Belsomra)

Also: Belsomra

Suvorexant is a newer sleep medication, sold as Belsomra, that works by blocking the brain's wakefulness signal rather than sedating you. It's used for both falling and staying asleep.

Taper

Also: tapering, weaning off

A taper is a planned, gradual reduction of a medication's dose, in steps, instead of stopping all at once. It gives the body time to adjust.

Tardive Dyskinesia

Also: TD

Tardive dyskinesia is a movement side effect that can develop after long-term use of certain medications, causing involuntary movements often in the face, mouth, or limbs. It warrants prompt attention from a prescriber.

Temazepam (Restoril)

Also: Restoril

Temazepam is a benzodiazepine, sold as Restoril, used for the short-term treatment of insomnia. It carries the dependence and withdrawal risks of its class.

Tolerance

Also: drug tolerance

Tolerance is when the body adapts to a medication so that the same dose does less than it used to. It's a physical adjustment, not a character flaw.

Trazodone (Desyrel)

Also: Desyrel

Trazodone is an older antidepressant now used most often at low doses as a sleep aid. It isn't habit-forming, which is why it's a common alternative to sleeping pills.

Tricyclic Antidepressant

Also: TCA, TCAs

Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) are an older class of antidepressant medication. They work but tend to cause more side effects than newer drugs, so they're often used after other options.

Venlafaxine (Effexor)

Also: Effexor, Effexor XR

Venlafaxine is an SNRI antidepressant, sold as Effexor XR, used for depression and several anxiety disorders. Missing doses tends to be noticeable, which makes taking it consistently matter.

Vortioxetine (Trintellix)

Also: Trintellix

Vortioxetine is a newer antidepressant, sold as Trintellix, used for depression. It has a lower rate of sexual side effects than many SSRIs, and it's expensive because it has no generic.

Washout period

Also: washout

A washout period is a deliberate gap between stopping one medication and starting another, so the first one has time to clear the body before the second arrives.

Withdrawal

Also: withdrawal symptoms

Withdrawal is the set of symptoms that show up when a substance the body has adapted to is reduced or stopped. With some substances it's uncomfortable, and with a few it's dangerous.

Z-drug

Also: nonbenzodiazepine hypnotic, Z-drugs

Z-drugs are a group of sleep medications, including zolpidem, eszopiclone, and zaleplon, that act on the same brain receptor as benzodiazepines but target sedation more selectively.

Zaleplon (Sonata)

Also: Sonata

Zaleplon is the shortest-acting Z-drug, sold as Sonata. It's used for trouble falling asleep, and it clears fast enough to leave little next-day hangover.

Zolpidem (Ambien)

Also: Ambien

Zolpidem is the most widely prescribed Z-drug, sold as Ambien. It's a fast-acting sleep medication used mainly for trouble falling asleep, and it's meant for short-term use.

Learn more: see all medications terms at shrinktionary.com/categories/medications