Humber River Health

Mental Health and Addictions Program

Clozapine

What You Should Know

What is clozapine?

Clozapine is a medicine that manages the symptoms of psychosis (such as hearing voices, experiencing unpleasant thoughts, being withdrawn or lacking energy and motivation). It works by restoring the balance of certain chemicals in the brain.

A doctor may put a patient on clozapine if they have not had success with other medicines.

What can I expect from clozapine?

For many people, clozapine can be a very effective treatment and make a big difference to their quality of life.

It takes a minimum of 4 to 6 weeks for some of the symptoms of psychosis to improve (such as, feeling calmer, better sleep). However, for other symptoms, such as disturbing thoughts and voices, it may take up to 16 weeks or more to notice any improvements.

You may find that your family, friends, or co-workers notice your symptoms fading before you do. In time, you may notice any or all of the following:

- You feel better and more able to be involved in life around you.
- Some of your symptoms gradually ease and you find you are able to concentrate better.
- Your relationships improve and you find it easier to socialize and mix with people.
- If you are in a hospital, you may become well enough to go home.
- You may be able to work/volunteer or take a course.

What are the possible benefits of clozapine?

By taking clozapine, you may see the following benefits:

- Fewer symptoms, such as hallucinations, delusions, disorganized thoughts
- Decreased risk of relapse
- Less muscle pain or fewer movement side effects
- Improved mood
- Increased interaction with others
- Improved self-care.

What are the possible side effects of clozapine?

Clozapine may cause side effects in some people, but the effects vary from person to person. Not everyone taking clozapine will get side effects. Many side effects will go away with time but some side effects may last for longer.

The next page provides a list of known **mild** side effects and **serious** side effects. Follow the directions given to manage the side effects that you are experiencing.

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Mild Side Effects	What to Do
Feeling tired or sleepy	• Talk to your doctor about your prescribed dose. • Taking most of your prescribed dose in the evening may help. • Do not drive a car or operate machinery if you are feeling drowsy.
Feeling dizzy	• Get up slowly from a lying or sitting position. Dangle your legs over the side of the bed before getting up. • Lie down if you still feel dizzy.
Having lots of saliva and drooling (may happen especially at night)	• Place a soft towel over your pillow to feel more comfortable. • Speak with your doctor about medicines that can help reduce this problem.
Constipation	• Increase the amount of fibre in your diet (whole grain foods, fruits, and vegetables). • Drink plenty of water and exercise regularly. • Talk to your doctor about other strategies if you are still constipated.
Gaining weight	• Monitor your food intake and try not to have snacks between meals. • Maintain a healthy diet and avoid foods that have a high fat or sugar content. • Have a regular exercise routine.

Serious Side Effects	What to Do
Flu-like symptoms (fever, sore throat) or other signs of infection	**If any of these serious side effects occur, report them to your doctor immediately.**
Allergic rash or itchiness	
Muscle spasms, stiffness, or weakness	
Slow, fast, or odd heart beats	
Fainting, blackouts, or seizures	

Which side effect must I monitor?

Clozapine may cause a very rare, but serious, side effect called agranulocytosis. This is where the number of white blood cells in your body lowers to an unsafe level. Your body needs white blood cells to fight infections. A severe decrease in white blood cells can lead to serious infections.

Under current clozapine guidelines, when taking this medicine, you will need frequent blood tests to monitor your white blood cell count. As you continue to take clozapine, you will need regular blood tests less often. The amount of blood taken at the lab is very small (about 1/2 a teaspoon).

- You will need blood tests **before** you start taking clozapine.
- For the first 26 weeks of treatment, you will need a blood test **every week**.
- Then, for the next 26 weeks of treatment, you will need a blood test **every two weeks**.
- After a year, we will likely offer you **monthly** tests.

These tests are all important. Your pharmacist is unable to give you your clozapine unless they have the result of your blood test.

How should I take this medicine?

Your doctor will prescribe clozapine in a tablet form that you must take daily.

- Follow the directions on your prescription label carefully. If there is something you do not understand on the label, please ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- Take clozapine with water or milk. **DO NOT take with grapefruit juice.**
- **Take the medicine regularly, even when you are feeling well.** Taking clozapine regularly will prevent your symptoms from occurring again.

If you have concerns about continuing on your medicine, please discuss these with your doctor.

What should I do if I forget a dose?

- Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. However, if it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. **Do not** take a double dose to make up for a missed one.
- If you miss taking clozapine for more than 2 days, call your doctor before taking any more medicine. Your doctor may want to restart your medicine at a lower dose.

What should I do if I want to move or go on vacation?

- If you are planning a holiday or a move, tell your doctor as soon as possible (at least 2 to 3 weeks before you leave). Your doctor will help arrange for you to get your regular blood tests and medicine wherever you go.
- **Do not stop taking clozapine without speaking with your doctor.**

Can I take other medicines while I am taking clozapine?

- Some medicines can interfere with clozapine causing unwanted effects. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicines, even if they are herbal medicines or medicines that you have bought at the pharmacy.

  For example, clozapine may increase the effects of sleeping pills, tranquilizers and anti-allergy medicines, making you feel very drowsy.
- Avoid taking illegal or street drugs, such as marijuana and ecstasy, since they can trigger psychosis. If you use these substances, you can talk to any member of your treatment team in confidence. We can help you learn about how these substances affect your illness and your treatment.

Can I smoke or drink alcohol or caffeine?

- Try to avoid alcohol. Clozapine may increase the effects of alcohol, making you feel very drowsy.
- Let your doctor know if you smoke, if you begin smoking more cigarettes than usual, or if wish to cut down or quit smoking. Cigarette smoking can decrease the amount of clozapine in your bloodstream.
- Try to avoid drinking too many caffeinated beverages, such as coffee, tea or cola. These beverages can increase the amount of clozapine in your bloodstream. Try not to make drastic changes to your normal caffeine intake. Speak to your doctor if this occurs.

Can I take clozapine if I am pregnant, thinking of becoming pregnant or breastfeeding?

- You should take clozapine during pregnancy only if you doctor specifically prescribes it. Speak with your doctor if you are, or intend to become, pregnant.
- Clozapine can pass into breast milk. If you are planning on breastfeeding, get your doctor's advice.

What is the proper way to store and dispose of this medicine?

- Keep this medicine in the container it came in, tightly closed, and out of reach of children.
- Store it at room temperature and away from excess heat and moisture (not in the bathroom).
- Throw away or hand in to your pharmacy any medicine that is outdated or you no longer need.
- Talk to your pharmacist about how to dispose of your medicine properly.

What other information should I know?

- Keep all appointments with your doctor and the laboratory.
- Do not let anyone else take your medicine.
- Do not stop taking clozapine or change the dosage without speaking with your doctor.

NOTES:

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