Long-Acting Injectable Antipsychotics for the Treatment of Schizophrenia: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Long-acting injectable antipsychotics—are they right for me?

Whether you just found out that you have schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder or have been living with either condition for quite some time, figuring out your best treatment can be confusing. According to NAMI—the National Alliance on Mental Illness—almost all patients require medicine to control symptoms and prevent more episodes of schizophrenia symptoms. A number of different medicines are available to be taken as pills or given as injections. The right treatment plan for you will depend on a number of factors and may include an LAI antipsychotic medicine.

What are LAIs?

LAI stands for “long-acting injectable.” It is a form of an antipsychotic medicine. This form of the drug is given by injection and remains effective longer than the pill form of the medication. Instead of taking a pill once or twice a day, you would get these injections on a schedule—usually every 2 to 4 weeks. Many people find that this kind of medicine is an easier way to manage their symptoms of schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder.

How do LAIs work?

This type of medicine works the same way in the brain as the pills by the same names. The injection forms release slowly over time, allowing them to be given weeks apart instead of every day.

Many medicines that you may already know about are also available in the injection form. If you decide that an LAI is right for you, your doctor will help you switch from pills to injections. With some kinds of medicine, you will also keep taking your pills until the injection medicine starts working and the correct dose is reached.

Who should take LAIs?

The decision to use an LAI should be made after talking more about them with your doctor and deciding whether a switch from pills to injections is right for you. They can be discussed as an option for:

• Anyone with a schizophrenia or a schizoaffective disorder who thinks that injection medicine may be easier for them
• People who have frequent episodes while on pills
• People who may have trouble remembering to take oral medicine

Sometimes life is busy and remembering to take medicine every day can be difficult. Also, as symptoms get better, sometimes people decide they don’t need their medicine any more, not realizing that the medicine is what is helping them feel better. They may also stop taking their medicine if it only helps some, but not all, of their symptoms. An LAI form of medicine may be able to help in these sorts of situations.

Not taking medicine as often or in the way prescribed by your doctor is one of the main reasons people may have more schizophrenia symptoms. Studies show that people who don’t stay on their prescribed medicines are 5 times more likely to have more episodes than those who take their medicine regularly.

What are the possible benefits of LAIs?

With injections, your doctor or nurse will give you your medicine during a regular office visit. Some states may even allow you to receive injections from your pharmacist. Medication diaries or records can help to show you why it is important to continue taking medicine and can help you and your doctor understand why symptoms may remain or a relapse has occurred. If the medicine doesn’t work well at first, your doctor will also have a good record of what and how much was given and may be able to make better changes to your treatment.
What are the risks and other things to think about with LAIs?

Injection antipsychotics have the same risks and side effects as the pill forms of the medicines. Either form of antipsychotics may cause sleepiness, changes in mood, certain muscle and movement disorders, hormone and digestive problems (resulting in increased blood sugar, increased cholesterol, weight gain, etc.), and other side effects. Each medicine has a slightly different set of side effects, so once you and your doctor decide which medicine is best for you, you should discuss the risks in detail.

There are a few additional things to think about with the injectable forms of these medicines. Some immediate side effects of injections include:

- **Injection-Site Reactions.** These may occur in up to 10% of patients. These reactions involve soreness, redness, and swelling around the area where the needle enters your skin.

- **Post-Injection Delirium Sedation Syndrome.** This may occur when a drug enters the bloodstream too fast and causes dangerously high levels of the medicine to be in your body. This can cause symptoms ranging from sleepiness to confusion or even loss of consciousness following an injection. While it is possible that the drug may enter the blood too fast, this has only happened for one LAI and can be treated quickly and successfully.

- **Severe Reactions and Death.** Both of these are rare. There are no exact statistics for all LAIs, but rare cases have been reported up to 3 days after injection.

- **Increased Risk Based on Age.** Elderly patients may have an increased risk of developing some of the common antipsychotic side effects and complications.

One LAI recommends that the doctor keep you in the office for a few hours after an injection is given to make sure you don’t have any reactions; this is called an “observation period.” Some people might find this time commitment inconvenient, in which case it should be weighed against potential benefits. Injectable drugs might also cost more at first, but this might be balanced out over time by the lower cost of having fewer symptoms.

How do I find out more?

Talk to your doctor if you think this form of medicine may be right for you or if you have more questions. These Web sites may also help (type “schizophrenia” in the search boxes on each page):

- **HelpGuide.org.** HelpGuide.org is a non-profit group that provides tips to help patients with schizophrenia in their treatment and recovery (www.helpguide.org)

- **Mental Health America.** This Web site has resources (in English and Spanish) on schizophrenia and maintaining your wellness when you have a mental illness (www.mentalhealthamerica.net)

- **National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI).** NAMI provides community-based support for people with any kind of mental illness. Their Web site provides an overview of schizophrenia and LAI treatment. (www.nami.org)

- **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).** NIMH is run by the United States Department of Health and Human Services and has in-depth information about schizophrenia (www.nimh.nih.gov)