

Pramipexole

Pramipexole (Mirapex) is a medication that is FDA-approved for restless-leg syndrome and Parkinson's disease. It has been extensively studied for depression and found to work as well as antidepressants for this condition. In bipolar depression, pramipexole is known to be more effective and less risky than antidepressants.

Pramipexole does not work like other antidepressants, which should give people hope who have not responded well to medications in the past. Research has found that it can work when other antidepressants haven't, and even works in people who have not responded to ECT (electroconvulsive therapy, which is generally twice as effective as medication). Another positive side of pramipexole is that it is relatively well tolerated. It does not cause weight gain, sexual side effects, or concentration problems.

There are two other medications that are similar to pramipexole: ropinirole (requip) and rotigotine (Neupro, which is delivered as a skin-patch and only available in brand form; the other two have generic options). These medicines have not been studied as extensively in depression as pramipexole but may be good options if pramipexole helped you but caused problematic side effects. The information below applies generally to all three medications in this class.

How it works

Pramipexole enhances dopamine in the mesolimbic part of the brain, which is involved in the ability to recognize rewards and experience life as pleasurable. This brain system is indirectly involved in the effects of most antidepressants; pramipexole is unique in that it works directly there. Pramipexole also works to help brain cells grow and strengthen.

How should I take it?

The time of day you take these medicines should be based on which side effects you have. The antidepressant effects build up gradually and are not impacted by the timing of the dose. Most people prefer to take it at night, as it can cause drowsiness, although some people feel activated on it and prefer morning dose.

Key Points

1. Pramipexole can cause drowsiness and is usually taken at night.
2. Nausea is the most common side effect. It may carry risks in heart disease.
3. Unlike traditional antidepressants, it works directly through dopamine. It takes 2-6 weeks to work.
4. Pay attention to the mg on your tablet, as this will likely change in your second prescription and we will need to know which size you are taking..

What 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.

How long do I need to take it?

There are two reasons to take pramipexole: to treat current symptoms and to prevent the return of symptoms. These two reasons will be different in each condition, and in many cases the decision to continue or stop it will be a personal one.

What happens if I stop it?

These medicines do not have serious withdrawal problems. You may experience restless legs if stopped abruptly, and there is a risk of depression returning if it is stopped.

Side effects

The most common side effects were nausea and fatigue. Usually taking the medication at night will reduce the fatigue, and pramipexole usually improves sleep quality. There have been cases of people falling asleep during the day after taking pramipexole and you should drive with caution after starting it. Rarely, people have insomnia on it.

The nausea usually gets better with time or can be reduced with medications for nausea if needed. Ginger can reduce nausea and is available in capsule form (e.g. Nature's Way on Amazon); the dosage is 1,000-2,000mg (=1-2 gram) per day. You can also call us if unable to tolerate the nausea as there may be prescription options to reduce it.

Rarely, pramipexole has been associated with impulsive gambling and hallucinations (hearing things or seeing things). These side effects have generally only occurred in people with Parkinson's disease (this condition usually impairs the brain in many ways and makes side effects more troublesome). Pramipexole does not cause weight gain, sexual side effects and has no significant interactions with other drugs.

A rare medical side effect is swelling of the legs (edema) which improves when the drug is stopped. Pramipexole may not be safe in heart disease; this subject is controversial but some data suggest a risk of heart failure on the medication.

As you are starting the medicine, use caution when driving or performing tasks that require alertness. This should not be a problem once you have adjusted to the medicine and know how it affects you.

Pregnancy: These medicines have not been adequately evaluated during pregnancy. It is secreted in breast milk.

Interactions

These medicines have few significant interactions. If you are starting a new drug you can check for interactions at:

reference.medscape.com/drug-interactionchecker

How to store and dispose of medication

- Keep out of the reach of children.
- Store away from heat, direct light and damp places.
- To safely dispose of unwanted pills: Do not pour in the toilet or sink (it will enter the water supply). To prevent children or pets from eating it, mix unwanted pills in a bag with a little water and inedible trash (such as coffee grounds or kitty litter) and throw in the trash.

Cost and insurance coverage

Pramipexole and ropinirole are available in generic form. If you are paying out-of-pocket, the lowest cost is usually found at Costco (you do not need to be a member to use their pharmacy). Rotigotine is only available in branded form.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 9/5/2016