



## Antipsychotic medication use in women and men with developmental disabilities

### What is this research about?

Antipsychotic medications are among the most commonly prescribed medications for individuals with developmental disabilities. They are prescribed to individuals with developmental disabilities to treat co-occurring psychiatric disorders such as psychosis, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. They may also be prescribed in an off-label manner to address aggressive behaviors in individuals with developmental disabilities. Previous studies have shown that in individuals without developmental disabilities, women who use antipsychotics are at greater risk of developing side effects, such as weight gain and blood clots, than men. Research also suggests that individuals with developmental disabilities are particularly susceptible to the side effects of antipsychotics because of other ongoing health issues. However, gender and sex differences in the safety of antipsychotics have rarely been studied in individuals with developmental disabilities.

### What did the researchers do?

The Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) program compared men and women with developmental disabilities in terms of their risks of experiencing side effects from antipsychotic medication initiation. Specifically, they examined the occurrence of metabolic and cardiovascular adverse events such as diabetes, hypertension, blood clots, heart attack, stroke and death in men and women newly starting antipsychotic medications.

### What did the researchers find?

A total of 1,457 women and 1,951 men with developmental disabilities who newly started an antipsychotic medication were identified between April 1, 2009 and March 1, 2010.

### What you need to know

This is a large, population-based study that explores differences between women and men with developmental disabilities in relation to side-effects of antipsychotic medications. Gender should be considered in prescribing of antipsychotic medications in this population.

Approximately 90% of men and women with developmental disabilities included in the study were prescribed second generation or atypical antipsychotic medications. Women newly starting antipsychotic medications were older and had more complex medical needs than men. Women were more likely to take more medications generally and to take antidepressant medications (in addition to their antipsychotics) compared to men. They were also more likely to have diabetes prior to starting antipsychotic medications. After considering these differences, women were more likely than men to have blood clots following initiation of antipsychotic medication. No differences were found between women and men when it came to developing diabetes, hypertension, heart attack, or stroke. The risk for death was higher in women versus men, but this difference was eliminated after considering baseline differences between the groups.

## About H-CARDD

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) is a research program with the primary goal of enhancing the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services. H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, and health care providers.

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## How can you use this research?

Concerns over high rates of antipsychotic prescriptions among individuals with developmental disabilities are beginning to emerge in the literature. This study provides knowledge about how women and men with developmental disabilities may differ on medical outcomes after newly starting antipsychotic medication. It is important for care providers to carefully consider the risks and benefits of prescribing antipsychotic medication to men and women with developmental disabilities, especially when non-drug options are available. Furthermore, there is a need to monitor for metabolic and cardiac side effects among men and women with developmental disabilities that are starting antipsychotic medications.

## About the researchers

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## Keywords

*Developmental disabilities, women, antipsychotic side effects, intellectual disability, chronic disease*

## Do you want to know more/additional resources?

This snapshot is based on the article entitled [‘Vigod, S. N., Lunskey, Y., Cobigo, V., Wilton, A., Somerton, S. & Seitz, D. P. \(2016\) Morbidity and mortality of women and men with intellectual and developmental disabilities newly initiating antipsychotic drugs. \*British Journal of Psychiatry Open\*, 2 \(2\), 188-194 doi: 10.1192/bjpo.bp.116.002691’](#)

You can find more information about this research and see other women's health snapshots at [www.hcardd.ca](http://www.hcardd.ca) on the women's health project [page](#).

Read a [summary](#) of the women's health virtual Town Hall. View the virtual Town Hall [here](#).

Read a newsletter for caregivers entitled [“Not Skirting the Issue: Discovering Ways to End Poor Health Care for Women with Developmental Disabilities”](#)

