



Treatment for Huntington's Disease

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by Meredith Walker January 10, 2018

Scientists have yet to develop a cure for [Huntington's disease](#) or a treatment that can stop its progression. But there are treatments that can help patients manage their symptoms, which include movement, cognitive, and psychiatric problems.

And researchers continue to work on [more effective treatments](#) for the disease.

Treatment for movement problems

The hallmark of Huntington's is muscle problems. They include muscle contractions, problems with voluntary movements such as walking and speech, and jerky involuntary movements known collectively as chorea, the most notable symptom of the disease.

[Xenazine \(tetrabenazine\)](#) is the first medication the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved specifically for Huntington's. It helps suppress jerky involuntary movements, but it may cause serious side effects, such as worsening depression.

[Antipsychotic medications](#) such as [Risperdal](#) (risperidone), [Haldol](#) (haloperidol) and [chlorpromazine](#) are often used [off-label](#) to treat Huntington's because they suppress chorea. An off-label therapy is one that helps patients with conditions the drug has not been approved for. Although it is legal, pharmaceutical companies may not market a medication for an off-label use.

In addition to suppressing chorea, antipsychotic medications can help manage psychiatric symptoms associated with Huntington's, including agitation and psychosis. Side effects of antipsychotics include drowsiness and dry mouth. Haldol and chlorpromazine may also worsen involuntary muscle contractions and rigidity. [Benzodiazepines](#) can also reduce chorea. They include [Klonopin](#) (clonazepam) and [Valium](#) (diazepam). Some of these medications can worsen the cognitive symptoms of Huntington's, however, and may carry a high risk of a patient becoming dependent on them and abusing them.

Treatment for psychiatric problems

The neurological damage associated with Huntington's can also cause such [psychiatric symptoms](#) as depression, [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#), mania, and [bipolar disorder](#).

Anti-depressants, mainly [selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors](#) like [Lexapro](#), [Prozac](#), and [Zoloft](#), are frequently used to treat Huntington's patients' depression. They can also alleviate some symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Doctors use anti-psychotic medications such as [Seroquel](#) (quetiapine) and [Risperdal](#) (risperidone) to treat mood disorders, including violent outbursts or delusions. [Mood stabilizing medications](#) can prevent the extreme highs and lows that characterize bipolar disorder. They include [Carbatrol](#) (carbamazepine), [Depacon](#) (valproate), and [Lamictal](#) (lamotrigine.)

Other therapies

Forms of therapy besides medications can alleviate Huntington's symptoms and help patients cope.

[Physical therapy](#) helps maintain mobility and reduce falls.

Huntington's can impair muscles in the mouth and throat, so speech and swallowing become difficult as the disease progresses. When this happens, [speech therapy](#) can help.

[Psychotherapy](#) can help patients and their families develop coping strategies for dealing with the disease and its progression.

[Occupational therapy](#) can help patients learn to use devices that assist them in performing everyday tasks like dressing and eating.

Support

Huntington's disease is challenging, and patients and caregivers need support. Non-profit groups like the [Huntington's Disease Society of America](#), [Huntington's Society Canada](#), and the [Huntington's Disease Association](#) in the United Kingdom are a good resource. They can identify social services available to patients and their families, and help them find support groups.

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