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IWK Health Centre

Trazodone

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Summary: Trazodone (Desyrel® and generic forms) is commonly used to treat problems with sleep (insomnia).

Overview

Trazodone (Desyrel® and generic forms) belongs to a group of medications called “antidepressants”. However, this medication is more commonly used to treat sleep problems (insomnia).

What is trazodone used for?

Trazodone is approved by Health Canada for the treatment of depression in adults, however other common uses include sleep problems (insomnia).

Your doctor may be using this medication to you for another reason. If you are unclear why trazodone is being prescribed, please ask your doctor.

How does trazodone work?

Trazodone works by affecting the activity of the brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) called serotonin and histamine. By enhancing the action of these neurotransmitters, trazodone helps you to fall asleep faster and increase total sleep duration, as well as improving symptoms of depression.

Trazodone in children and adolescents

Like many other medications prescribed for children and adolescents, this medication is not officially approved by Health Canada for this age group. Nonetheless, when the potential benefits (e.g., reducing symptoms) of using this medication outweigh the potential risks (e.g., side effects), doctors may prescribe it “off label” in children and adolescents.

Start with sleep strategies

Before starting treatment with trazodone for sleep, it is suggested that you try behavioural changes first to see if you have a need for medication. Sometimes, good sleep hygiene may be all that is needed to improve sleep difficulties. Whenever possible, adding good sleep hygiene strategies to trazodone therapy increases the chance you will benefit from this medication.

Common sleep strategies:

- Avoid caffeine (from tea, coffee, colas or energy drinks) and alcohol, nicotine or other recreational drugs
- Keep a regular sleep/wake schedule every day; avoid sleeping in or napping during the day
- Avoid stimulating activities before bedtime (e.g. computer or television time or exercise late in the evening)
- Ensure a quiet and comfortable sleep environment (e.g. comfortable temperature, dark room, no pets in bed)
- Doing something relaxing or enjoyable before bedtime (e.g. listen to soothing music or take a warm bath)
- Avoid large meals just before bedtime
- Exercise regularly (during the daytime)
- Use your bedroom only for sleep; remove the clock from direct eyesight
- If you are not asleep within 20 minutes, get up and go to another room. Come back to bed when you feel drowsy.

How should trazodone be taken?

Trazodone is available as tablets that are taken by mouth. For sleep difficulties, usually a low dose is taken once daily at bedtime. Some patients may only need to take trazodone occasionally on an as-needed basis for sleep difficulties, while other patients may take it regularly. Discuss with your doctor how you should take this medication.

When used to treat depression, your doctor may start with a lower dose that is taken two to three times daily. Then, the dose is slowly increased every based on how you respond to it. Your doctor will determine how much trazodone you should take, according to your symptoms and your response to this medication.

You and your doctor can discuss the best dosage to stay on based on how you tolerate this medication (how well the medication is working and how you are doing with the side effects of the medication) and how well it helps to decrease your symptoms.

When used to treat depression, trazodone needs to be taken regularly on a daily basis in order to be effective (even if you feel well). You should take this medication at the same time(s) each day as directed by your doctor. Try to connect it with something you do each day (like eating breakfast or brushing your teeth) so that you don’t forget.

When used to treat depression, take trazodone after meals or with a light snack to decrease your risk for side effects such as dizziness and lightheadedness. Do not drink alcohol while taking this medication, as it may result in increased side effects (e.g. increased drowsiness and impaired coordination).

When will trazodone start working?

If you are taking trazodone for sleep, you should start feeling drowsy within 30-60 minutes of taking trazodone.

If you are taking trazodone for depression, it may take 2 to 3 weeks before you start seeing improvements in your symptoms. It may take 4 weeks to see the full effect of this medication. Since this medication takes time to work, do not increase, decrease or stop it without discussing it with your doctor first.

How long do I have to take trazodone?

Discuss with your doctor how long you may need to take trazodone.

When used for sleep disorders, some patients take trazodone occasionally on an as-needed basis, while others may take it regularly for as long as sleep problems persist, which can range from several weeks to several months.

When used to treat depression, the length of treatment depends on the symptoms you have, how frequently they occur and how long you have had them. Most patients need to take this medication for at least 6 months. This allows time for your symptoms to stabilize and for you to regain functioning. After this time, you and your doctor should discuss the benefits and risks of continuing treatment. If you have had several episodes of severe depression and you tolerate this medication well, you may be asked to take this medication for an indefinite amount of time. By continuing to take this medication, you significantly decrease the chance of having another episode of depression. Do NOT stop taking this medication (even if you are feeling better) without discussing it with your doctor first. If you stop taking this medication suddenly, it is possible that your symptoms may return.

Is trazodone addictive?

Trazodone is not addictive. You will not have “cravings” for it like some people do with nicotine or street drugs.

In contrast to other sleep medications such as benzodiazepines (e.g., lorazepam (Ativan®)) and zopiclone (Imovane®), trazodone does not have a risk of physical or psychological dependence.

What are the side effects of trazodone and what should I do if I get them?

As with most medications, side effects may occur when taking trazodone. Most side effects are mild and temporary.

Sometimes, side effects of this medication may occur before any of the beneficial effects. It is possible for some individuals to experience side effects that they feel are serious or long lasting. If you feel this has happened, speak with your doctor right away. Below are some of the more common side effects of taking this medication. In brackets
are suggested ways to lessen these effects.

Common side effects

Side effects may be more common when starting a medication or after a dose increase. If any of these side effects is too troublesome for you, please discuss them with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

- Blurred vision (do not drive or operate machinery until you know how this medication affects you.)
- Constipation (try drinking more fluids, exercising, or increasing the amount of fiber in your diet)
- Dry mouth (try chewing sugarless gum or sucking hard sugar-free candies, ice chips, or popsicles)
- Dizziness, lightheadedness (try getting up slowly from a sitting or lying down position. Do not drive or operate machinery until you know how this medication affects you.)
- Headache (try using a pain reliever like acetaminophen (Tylenol®))
- Incoordination (do not take drive, operate machinery or take part in activities that require physical coordination until you know how this medication affects you)
- Morning drowsiness/tiredness following trazodone use (this usually goes away if the dose is decreased.
- Do not drive or operate machinery until you know how this medication affects you)
- Nausea, vomiting, stomach ache (try taking with food)
- Shakiness (tremors), muscle aches

This medication may affect your ability to drive, operate machinery or carry out tasks that require mental alertness. This effect may be more pronounced if this medication is taken with alcohol.

Uncommon side effects (e.g. those occurring in less than 5% of patients)

Contact your doctor IMMEDIATELY if you have any of these side effects:

- Change in mood to an unusual state of excitement, irritability or happiness
- Hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not there)
- Irregular heart beat (palpitations)
- Skin rash, itchy skin or hives
- Thoughts of self-harm, hostility or suicide
- For males: prolonged (i.e., more than four hours), inappropriate, and/or painful erections of the penis (this effect is very rare. However, this is a potentially very serious effect that may cause permanent damage.

Stop this medication immediately and seek emergency medical help if you experience these effects.)

What precautions should my doctor and I be aware of when taking trazodone?

Several medications may interact with trazodone, including sleep aides or antihistamines such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl®, Nytol®) and doxylamine (Unisom®); anti-anxiety medications such as lorazepam (Ativan®), antidepressants, mood stabilizers such as lithium, monoamine oxidase inhibitors such as selegiline (Eldepryl®) or phenelzine (Nardil®), and several others. If you are (or begin) taking any other prescription or over-the-counter medications, be sure to check with your doctor or pharmacist to see if they are safe to use. Your doctor may need to change the doses of your medication(s) or monitor you carefully for side effects if you are taking certain other medications.

Tell your doctor or pharmacist if you:

- Drink alcohol regularly or have a history of alcohol or drug abuse/addiction
- Have had allergies or bad reactions to trazodone or any other medication
- Have a heart condition or seizure disorder
- Have liver or kidney problems
- Have bipolar disorder or any other psychiatric condition, thoughts of self harm or suicide
- Miss a period, become pregnant or are trying to become pregnant or are breast-feeding

What special instructions should I follow while using trazodone?

- Keep all appointments with your doctor. Inform your doctor about your sleep pattern and/or symptoms of depression. Your doctor will monitor your condition and your response to this medication.
- Do not allow anyone else to use your medication.

What should I do if I forget to take a dose of trazodone?

If you take trazodone regularly for sleep and you forget to take it, skip the missed dose and take your next dose at its regularly scheduled time the next day. Do NOT double your next dose.

If you take trazodone for depression and you forget to take it, take it as soon as you remember. However, it is within 4 hours of your next regularly scheduled dose, skip the missed dose and continue with your regular schedule. Do NOT double your next dose.

What storage conditions are needed for trazodone?

- Keep this medication in the original container, tightly closed and protected from light. Store at room temperature away from moisture and heat (e.g., not in the bathroom).
- Keep this medication out of reach and sight of children.

About this document

Special thanks to the Kelty Centre for Mental Health for permission to adapt this document. The original document was developed by health professionals of BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, and reviewed by the staff of the Kelty Mental Health Centre. French translation provided courtesy of the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health.

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