



Coping with Weight Gain from Psychiatric Medication Side Effects

Putting Recovery into Practice

<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/>

RESEARCH PUBLICATION:

Kreyenbuhl, J., Lucksted, A., Despeaux, K. & Sykes, V.M. (2019). Understanding Women Veterans' Experiences with and Management of Weight Gain from Medications for Serious Mental Illness: A Qualitative Study. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 42, pp. 238-245.

ARTICLE SUMMARY:

Some psychiatric medications have metabolic side effects like weight gain. In surveys, women are more bothered by this than men. We wanted to learn about how women Veterans* experience and manage medication-induced weight gain so we could identify prevention and management strategies. We interviewed 30 women Veterans prescribed antipsychotic or mood stabilizer medications for serious mental illnesses and 18 psychiatric medication prescribers. The interviews were analyzed and several themes were identified such as: 1. women Veterans and prescribers were upset because of the physical and mental effects of weight gain; 2. they struggled with the trade-offs between therapeutic benefits of medications and weight gain; 3. they struggled with being proactive with weight gain prevention; 4. there are serious limitations in strategies for preventing or managing this weight gain; 5. a variety of other things contribute to the aforementioned struggles, such as the many causes of weight gain, consistency about information women receive about side effects, lack of social support, and environmental barriers to weight management. [Abstract Online](#)

Research into Practice

What Can Veterans and Their Families Do?

- If you are concerned about medication-induced weight gain, make an appointment to discuss this with your prescriber. You can:
 - o Ask if they can recommend psychiatric medications that cause less weight gain.
 - o Review all your medications to see if you are taking other medications with risk of weight gain and if any changes can be made.
 - o Discuss ways to address the sedating medication effects that can promote weight gain and make active lifestyles difficult (e.g., consider asking about taking the meds at night versus the morning).
- You can ask your social supports to help you:
 - o Find information about medication side effects.
 - o Be your work-out buddy.
 - o Cook healthy recipes together.
- Ask your VA about [MOVE!](#), a weight management program, and new [Whole Health](#) programs and courses.

*Although the current study focused on women Veterans, these considerations could apply to anyone taking psychiatric medications.

What Can Clinicians Do?

- Prior to prescribing any medication, have a discussion about potential side effects including:
 - o How willing is the Veteran to accept potential side effects?
 - o The Veteran's individual and environmental risk and protective factors for fitness and weight gain.
 - o Prevention strategies the Veteran can begin.
 - o Stress your willingness to work with the Veteran to find another medication if the side effects are intolerable.
- Prescribers can encourage Veterans to seek support to cope with trade-offs between therapeutic effects of medication and side effects. Mental health care providers should consider discussing negative side effects and how the client is coping.
- Though prescribers often worry that side effects will cause Veterans to stop medication usage, most Veterans interviewed rejected stopping treatment on their own because of weight gain.