



# Making the right choice

Your guide to psychotropic medications for youth in foster care

**Anthem**    
HealthKeepers Plus  
Offered by HealthKeepers, Inc.





## Understanding the link between trauma and medication

Children in the child welfare system often have experienced abuse, neglect, or other traumatic situations that affect their emotional and physical health and well-being. This can lead to complicated emotions and behaviors. Many children can heal from their experiences, but it takes time and a combination of trauma-informed services, stability, and support.

### Inside this guide, you will learn about:

- What psychotropic medications are.
- Psychotropic medication facts.
- How to know if you need help.
- How to choose the right treatment.
- Important things to keep in mind.
- Topics to discuss with the doctor.
- Tips for medicine safety.
- Important phone numbers and resources.

## What are psychotropic medications?

Doctors prescribe these drugs to help people focus on school or work and enjoy their lives more. Many young people in the child-welfare system are prescribed these types of medications to help treat their emotions and behaviors. Youth in care often struggle with past trauma and loss, a lot of changes, and issues with family, friends, or their placement. Sometimes, the feelings that result can become overwhelming, or even result in depression,

anxiety, or stress symptoms that need to be treated with medication. While some youth may benefit from medication to treat certain illnesses, these drugs may have significant side effects if not used as a doctor prescribes. Also, medications do not address the root causes of a child's trauma. This is why it is important to combine medication, if needed, with other trauma-informed behavioral health services.

# Psychotropic medication facts

Youth who have experienced trauma, such as abuse or neglect, may heal and become more resilient over time. Others need additional supports and services, like medication. While there is a role for these medications to help address certain illnesses, emotions, or behaviors, they can be harmful if used improperly.



Studies consistently show even higher rates of psychotropic medication use for children in child welfare than in the general population, with usage rates between 13 and 52.



Many psychotropic medications are not FDA approved for use in young children. Studies show the use of psychotropic medications by infants and young children can lead to serious long-term health effects.



Youth in care are often prescribed psychotropic medications for extended periods while in the child welfare system. It is important to consult with the prescribing doctor about the long-term side effects of medication use, like weight gain, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, hallucinations, and suicidal thoughts.



Prescribing more than one psychotropic medication is called **polypharmacy**.

Research by the National Library of Medicine shows

# 41.3%

of youth in the child welfare system are prescribed drugs from more than three different drug classes. A drug class is a group of medications that have similar chemical makeups, along with similar physical effects or chemical reactions in your body.

Concerns about psychotropic drug use among youth in foster care have fueled efforts to ensure better delivery of care and services with HealthKeepers, Inc. **If you ever have questions about medication or treatment options, our team of doctors, specialists, and pharmacists are ready to assist you.**



# It is OK to ask for help.

It is not always easy to know when you should get help from a doctor, caseworker, or caring adult. Signs that it may be time to ask for help include:

- Symptoms occurring most days.
- A big change in feelings or emotions.
- Symptoms that affect school, a job, or relationships.
- Behaviors that are dangerous to yourself or others.

If you see these signs, talk to a trusted adult about scheduling an appointment with a doctor or behavioral health specialist. The doctor will work with you or your child to figure out what is wrong, and what may help you or your child feel better.

## HealthKeepers, Inc. is here to help.

We have a team trained to answer your questions about psychotropic medications and treatment options for children enrolled in Anthem HealthKeepers Plus Foster Care Specialty Plan. If you have questions, call **833-838-2605 (TTY 711)**, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Eastern time.



### If your child is in crisis

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, contact the **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** by calling or texting **988** or visiting **988lifeline.org**. Call the **24/7 Behavioral Health Crisis Line** at **844-429-9620 (TTY 711)** 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If a situation is life-threatening, always call **911**.



# Choosing the right treatment

Each individual's needs are different. You can discuss what options may work best for you or your child with a care manager, doctor, or behavioral health specialist.

These options may include:



**Treatment types other than medication, such as counseling or therapy.**



**Psychotropic medication for short- or long-term use.**



**A combination of both.**

In addition to medication and therapy, there are many other types of activities that can aid in a youth's healing, like:



Meditation, exercise, and changes to diet or sleep.



Participating in clubs, sports, or volunteering.



Keeping a journal, doing artwork, or listening to music.



Joining a faith community at a church, synagogue, mosque, etc.



Spending time with friends, classmates, or your foster family.



## Important things to keep in mind

When figuring out what treatment plan is best for you or your child:

**Consider options besides medication.** While psychotropic medications may be helpful for some, it should rarely be the first and only treatment option.

**Learn about safe medication use.** If you or the child in your care is prescribed medicine, learn:

- How it works.
- Its side effects.
- Its expected benefits.

**Give youth a voice.** Involve them in their own care by talking with them about:

- How they are feeling.
- Treatment options and decisions.
- The importance of taking care of themselves.

**Learn about trauma and its effects.** Childhood trauma can have long-lasting effects if gone untreated. The more you understand trauma, the better equipped you or your child will be to heal and learn healthy coping skills.

**Honor specific ethnic, racial, cultural, gender, and sexual identities.** This includes native languages, beliefs, values, and attitudes about care and treatment. Welcome the child's cultural and religious practices and use of spiritual traditions. Some of these may seem "nontraditional" to you. It is also important to support youth in building a deeper understanding of their identities. This includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Do not be afraid to ask doctors and specialists many questions.** The more you understand, the better decisions you can make. On the next page, there is a list of questions to use as a guide.

**Have realistic expectations.** Change does not happen quickly. When needed, do not be afraid to ask for support for yourself or the child in your care.





## Questions to ask the doctor

The questions below can help guide you as you discuss treatment options with a doctor or behavioral health professional. Based on what you learn, this information can be helpful as you decide what is best for you or your child.

- What is the diagnosis, or is there more than one?
- Do you recommend medication? What is the name of the medication you recommend?
- How much do I/does my child have to take, and how often? (This is called “dosage.”)
- How long will I/my child have to take the medication?
- How will I know it is working? When will it start working?
- Is this medication good for all ages?
- How much experience do you have with this medication?
- How will this medication make me/my child feel?
- What are the medication’s side effects? How long do they typically last?
- Is this medication addictive, or hard to give up once started?
- What do I do if a problem develops, like sickness, miss taking the medication, or side effects?
- Will blood work or other kinds of medical tests be needed before, during, or after treatment? What will the doctor look for?
- What do I do if I start taking the medication, and then decide I do not like the outcome? Who do I talk to?
- If I want to, can I just stop taking the medication?
- Who can I talk to about medication other than my/my child’s doctor? Who needs to know about this medication, and why?
- What might help other than medication (meditation, changes in diet, exercise, etc.)?
- Should I try other things that might help at the same time as the medication?

# Tips for medicine safety

Medications can help you or your child feel better. It is important to take them the right way. To increase the benefits and to reduce the risks of using psychotropic medications, remember to:



**Follow the directions on the label.** It works best if taken in the way it was prescribed for you or your child.



**Work closely with your or your child's doctor.** Be sure to follow dosage instructions, don't be afraid to ask questions, and try to keep appointments to check in and watch your or your child's progress.



**Learn about what things don't mix well with the medication.**

Some medicines, foods, and drinks, like alcohol, should not be taken together. When mixed, they may reduce the positive effects of the medication, or cause harmful effects. Learn to look at prescription labels and talk with your or your child's doctor or pharmacist.



**Keep records.** Keep an updated list on paper or digitally of all medicines being taken. This includes vitamins and other supplements. Make notes on how these make you or your child feel, side effects, and changes over time.



**Store medicines properly.** Store medications in a cool, dry place. Keep them away from children and pets.



**Do not share medications.** Giving any medications to someone else could result in serious side effects, and even death.



**Prevent breaks in taking medications.** Do not wait until you run out of medication before you ask for a refill. Add a reminder to your calendar or phone to check your supply and call for a refill. In some cases, you may have to see a doctor for a refill.



# Important phone numbers

**Anthem HealthKeepers Plus Foster Care Specialty Support Line: 833-838-2605 (TTY 711)**, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern time

**My/my child's care manager's name:**

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**My/my child's care manager's phone number:**

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**My/my child's primary care provider (PCP)'s name:**

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**My/my child's PCP's phone number:**

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**My/my child's behavioral health (BH) provider's name:**

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**My/my child's BH provider's phone number:**

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## Sources

- Anthem Public Policy Institute: *Improving Psychotropic Medication Use Among Children in Foster Care* (2019): <https://www.anthempublicpolicyinstitute.com/blog/improving-psychotropic-medication-use-among-children-in-foster-care>.
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- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: ACYF-CB-IM-12-03 (2020): <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/im1203.pdf>.
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- Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc.: *Improving the Use of Psychotropic Medication for Children in Foster Care: State Profiles* (2018): [https://www.chcs.org/media/PMQIC-Profiles\\_030818.pdf](https://www.chcs.org/media/PMQIC-Profiles_030818.pdf).
- Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute website: *Ensuring Foster Youth Are Only Prescribed Psychotropic Medication When in Their Best Interest* (accessed February 2020): [pcori.org](https://www.pcori.org).
- Child Welfare Information Gateway website: *Understanding Psychotropic Medications* (accessed February 2020): [childwelfare.gov](https://www.childwelfare.gov).

[anthem.com/va/medicaid/foster-care-adoption](https://anthem.com/va/medicaid/foster-care-adoption)



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Call toll free for translation or oral interpretation at no cost/Llame a la línea gratuita para obtener traducción o interpretación oral sin costo: 800-901-0020; TTY 711.

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- Race • Color • National origin • Age • Disability • Sex or gender identity

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