

Medical Risk in Patients With Bipolar Disorder and Schizophrenia

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Patients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are vulnerable to developing key modifiable risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as obesity, smoking, hypertension, dyslipidemia, and type 2 diabetes mellitus. In addition, mood stabilizers, anticonvulsants, and antipsychotic medications, which are commonly used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, have been linked to risk for adverse metabolic changes in patients. This article reviews the current literature on the prevalence of medical risk factors in the general population as well as in those patients with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder and discusses treatment strategies and lifestyle changes that patients can make in order to reduce their risks for certain diseases.

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ADVERSE EVENTS IN THE TREATMENT OF SCHIZOPHRENIA AND BIPOLAR DISORDER

A variety of adverse event risks are associated with pharmacologic treatment of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, including extrapyramidal symptoms, tardive dyskinesia, elevated prolactin levels,¹ somnolence, weight gain, hyperlipidemia, hypothyroidism, hepatic toxicity,² and impaired memory.^{3,4} These adverse events occur at different frequencies with different medications, which forms a large part of the risk-benefit calculation routinely made by clinicians to determine the optimal treatment regimen for each patient.

In the treatment of both schizophrenia and bipolar disorders, tolerability and safety issues are a primary concern when prescribing any medication. Tolerability issues can be defined in relation to nonlethal, time-limited, or manageable adverse events that may be more nuisance-related symptoms than medically significant (e.g., mild parkinsonism, nausea, or sedation); whereas, safety issues can be defined as life-threatening, treatment-related adverse events that can occur on an acute or chronic basis (e.g., neuroleptic malignant syndrome, anaphylaxis, or metabolic syndrome). Tolerability and safety issues may overlap in some areas. For example, weight gain may

begin as a tolerability problem but can increase the risks of metabolic syndrome, thereby increasing the risk of life-threatening conditions such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes.

MEDICAL DISORDERS IN PATIENTS WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA OR BIPOLAR DISORDER

Patients with mental illnesses and medical disorders have higher mortality rates than patients with medical disorders alone. For example, individuals with bipolar disorder or unipolar depression and a medical condition were found to have higher standardized mortality ratios (observed deaths/expected deaths) for natural causes of death than the general population that had a medical condition (1.9 in males, 2.1 in females; 1.5 in males, 1.6 in females, respectively).⁴ A meta-analysis conducted by Allebeck⁵ found that for patients with schizophrenia the standardized mortality ratio for natural causes of death ranged between 1.8 and 4.4. In comparison to general population samples, patients with schizophrenia have been reported to have a 40% increased risk of death from medical causes,⁶ and recent U.S. data indicate that persons with a major mental disorder lose approximately 20 to 30 years of potential life due primarily to cardiovascular disease.⁷ Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of death in these patients, as it is in the general population, as well as the leading contributor to excessive deaths.⁸

The Framingham Heart Study⁹ sponsored by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) identified key modifiable risk factors for developing coronary heart disease. Risk factors include obesity, smoking, hyperglycemia, hypertension, and dyslipidemia. Having more than 1 of these risks increases the odds of developing heart disease, which increases with the number of risk factors in an additive or greater manner.⁹ Growing evidence

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indicates that patients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder have an increased prevalence of each of these modifiable risk factors, offering an explanation for the increased cardiovascular mortality observed in this population and suggesting an opportunity to lower risk (Table 1).¹⁰⁻¹⁹

Obesity is a strong predictor of cardiovascular disease as well as an underlying cause of many of the other risk factors mentioned. For example, as body fat increases body mass index (BMI = weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared), the relative risk of several medical conditions increases, especially the risk for type 2 diabetes mellitus.²⁰ Increased adipose tissue is associated with decreases in insulin sensitivity or resistance to insulin action,²¹ initially resulting in a compensatory hypersecretion of insulin by pancreatic beta cells. In persons at risk for type 2 diabetes, this compensatory hyperinsulinemia can eventually fail, leading to progressive hyperglycemia. In general, insulin resistance and related hyperinsulinemia increase the risk for a constellation of related changes in physiology known as the insulin resistance syndrome. This syndrome can encompass disturbances in glucose metabolism, uric acid metabolism, and lipid metabolism, with a characteristic dyslipidemia that includes increases in fasting plasma triglyceride, decreases in high-density lipoproteins, and atherogenic changes in low-density lipoproteins. In addition, the syndrome can include a hemodynamic disturbance with increases in sympathetic nervous system activity and sodium retention leading to hypertension, increases in inflammatory markers, and an increased risk of blood clotting—all risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease.^{22,23} People with insulin resistance syndrome are at risk for developing several illnesses, including hypertension,^{24,25} sleep breathing disorder, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, polycystic ovarian syndrome, and some types of cancer.²⁴ Individuals with insulin resistance syndrome are also at an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes,²³⁻²⁵ a disease that leads to macrovascular diseases (i.e., atherosclerosis) as well as microvascular diseases such as retinopathy, nephropathy, or neuropathy.

COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION IN CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND DIABETES

Cardiovascular diseases such as atherosclerosis can substantially impact cognitive function. For example, comorbid cerebrovascular disease in patients with Alzheimer's disease has been shown to hasten the pathologic and cognitive expression of dementia,^{26,27} and cognitive deficits may be adversely affected despite less neurofibrillary pathology.²⁶⁻²⁸

Type 2 diabetes is also associated with cognitive deficits²⁹ such as impairments in verbal memory,^{30,31} learning,³¹ attention,³² manual dexterity,^{32,33} reasoning,^{31,32}

Table 1. Estimated Prevalence of Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors Among Patients With Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder

Modifiable Risk Factors	Estimated Prevalence (%)	
	Schizophrenia	Bipolar Disorder
Obesity ¹⁰⁻¹²	42.0	20.8-49.0
Smoking ^{11,13-16}	54.0-75.0	54.0-67.6
Diabetes ^{10,14,17-19}	13.0-14.9	8.0-17.0
Hypertension ^{10,11,14,17,19}	19.0-57.7	35.0-39.0
Dyslipidemia ^{10,11,19}	25.0	23.0

and psychomotor speed.^{31,32,34} Although many individuals with diabetes may have macrovascular disease, cognitive deficits may not all be attributable to cerebrovascular disease. Cognitive dysfunction in type 2 diabetes may be related to deficient insulin production within the body, resulting in altered glucose signaling in the brain. Glucose, extracted from capillary beds in the brain, is the energy supply for cognition and is stored as glycogen in astrocytes,³⁵ with insulin having both a time- and dose-dependent role in regulating the storage of glycogen.³⁶

Insulin plays additional important roles in the regulation of cerebral function. For example, insulin receptors are expressed at the hippocampal³⁷ and cortical synapses,³⁸ which can increase glucose uptake in these specific regions.³⁹ Insulin signaling can also increase the levels of certain biogenic amines such as dopamine, acetylcholine, and norepinephrine,⁴⁰ as well as modulate membrane potentials, membrane expression of *N*-methyl-D-aspartic acid (NMDA) receptors, and the long-term potentiation of neuronal firing that is thought to underlie memory function.³⁷ Hyperinsulinemia and insulin resistance in type 2 diabetes are associated with an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.⁴¹⁻⁴³ Investigators have hypothesized that this role is related in part to the role of insulin in regulating the amyloid beta (A β) 42.⁴⁴

Because cerebrovascular disease and diabetes can lead to impairments in cognitive function, it is important to manage risk factors for these diseases in the general population and also in patients with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, in which cognitive function is already decreased.

METABOLIC SYNDROME IN PATIENTS WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA OR BIPOLAR DISORDER

The National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) defines the metabolic syndrome as a constellation of lipid and nonlipid risk factors of metabolic origin, closely linked to a generalized metabolic condition called insulin resistance in which the normal actions of insulin are impaired. NCEP has developed a working definition of metabolic syndrome in which having 3 or more criteria qualifies for a diagnosis (Table 2).⁴⁵ People with metabolic

Table 2. Identification of Metabolic Syndrome (≥ 3 Risk Factors Required for Diagnosis)^a

Risk Factor	Defining Level
Abdominal obesity	Waist circumference
Men	> 40 in (> 102 cm)
Women	> 35 in (> 88 cm)
Triglycerides	≥ 150 mg/dL
HDL cholesterol	
Men	< 40 mg/dL
Women	< 50 mg/dL
Blood pressure	$\geq 130/85$ mm Hg
Fasting blood glucose	≥ 110 mg/dL

^aReprinted with permission from the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) Expert Panel on Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Cholesterol in Adults (Adult Treatment Panel III).⁴⁵

Abbreviation: HDL = high-density lipoprotein.

syndrome have a 1.29 to 2.78 hazard ratio,⁴⁶⁻⁴⁹ 2.01 odds ratio,⁵⁰ and 1.5 to 3.0 relative risk⁵¹⁻⁵⁴ for cardiovascular disease, and a 3.5 hazard ratio⁴⁶ and 1.3 to 4.2 odds ratio^{50,55,56} for diabetes. Having 3 to 5 criteria means that risk is dramatically multiplied: up to 3.7 times the relative risk for coronary heart disease,⁴⁶ up to 24.5 times the risk for diabetes,⁴⁶ and up to 10 times the risk for increased C-reactive protein, which is associated with both cardiovascular disease and diabetes.⁵⁷

Using established NCEP criteria for metabolic syndrome, McEvoy et al.⁵⁸ compared baseline characteristics of subjects with schizophrenia entering the Clinical Antipsychotic Trials of Intervention Effectiveness (CATIE) study⁵⁹ with characteristics of persons in the general population based on data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) III.⁶⁰ Metabolic syndrome was found to be present in 51.6% of women and 36.0% of men with schizophrenia, while healthy women and men had rates of 25.1% and 19.7%, respectively. Compared with the general-population NHANES group, patients with schizophrenia had a higher prevalence of almost all criteria for metabolic syndrome, including increased waist circumference, high triglyceride levels, low high-density lipoprotein levels, and increased blood pressure, as well as more impairment in fasting blood glucose levels in women. The only exception to the fact that CATIE schizophrenia subjects generally have a higher prevalence of meeting all metabolic syndrome criteria was that men with schizophrenia entering the CATIE study had a prevalence of abnormal fasting blood glucose (as measured by the American Heart Association cutoff of ≥ 100 mg/dL) similar to their NHANES counterpart. In general, compensatory hyperinsulinemia buffers changes in plasma glucose, so that glucose control can be maintained for some years in the face of insulin resistance, even when changes in adiposity, plasma lipid levels, and blood pressure are already evident.

The most important predictor of metabolic syndrome is increased adiposity. In the United States, 27% of the gen-

eral population¹¹ is obese compared with an estimated 42% of patients with schizophrenia¹¹ and 49% of patients with bipolar disorder.¹⁰ Using the NHLBI overweight and obesity guidelines for BMI,⁶¹ Park et al.⁶² found metabolic syndrome present in patients with the following weight classifications: 4.6% of normal weight men (BMI from 18.5 to 24.9 kg/m²), 22.4% of overweight men (BMI from 25 to 29.9 kg/m²), and 59.6% of obese men (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²), with similar results being reported for women.

PHARMACOTHERAPY FOR PATIENTS WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA OR BIPOLAR DISORDER

Psychotropic drugs prescribed to patients with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder can induce or exacerbate some of the modifiable risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease and diabetes.⁶³ As indicated in labeling information provided in the Physicians' Desk Reference,⁶⁴ weight gain, hypertension, hyperglycemia, and diabetes are all potential adverse effects associated with antipsychotic treatment.

Weight gain, in particular, is a commonly observed adverse effect associated with antipsychotics and other psychotropic drugs such as the antimanic agents lithium, valproic acid, and carbamazepine.⁶⁴ However, different medications carry a different magnitude of risk for inducing clinically significant effects on weight. Comparing antipsychotics used in the CATIE study (Table 3),⁶⁵ olanzapine produced the largest mean increase in weight per month of treatment, while ziprasidone and perphenazine treatment actually produced a mean decrease in weight per month of treatment. It should be noted, however, that any decrease in weight with the latter agents is most likely the result of a change from prior medication rather than an intrinsic effect of these antipsychotics to reduce weight. In a study⁶⁶ comparing use of lithium or valproate in combination with olanzapine versus lithium or valproate alone (i.e., either agent in combination with placebo), significant weight gain was associated with adjunctive olanzapine (21.1% with lithium and 28.8% with valproate) as opposed to placebo (4.9% and 8.2%, respectively).

At least in part, the weight gain associated with treatment can help to explain the reported effects of different medications on insulin resistance and the risk of hyperglycemia, dyslipidemia, and metabolic syndrome.⁶³ The Consensus Development Conference on Antipsychotic Drugs and Obesity and Diabetes⁶⁷ concluded that different levels of risk are associated with different treatments, ranging from an increased risk of weight gain, diabetes, or dyslipidemia, with some agents to limited or no evidence of risk for those adverse events with other agents (Table 4).

Metabolic effects of antipsychotic treatment, including alterations in plasma of cholesterol, triglycerides, and

Table 3. Comparison of CATIE Outcome Measures for Antipsychotic Agents (Mean ± SE)^a

Effect	Olanzapine	Quetiapine	Risperidone	Perphenazine	Ziprasidone
Weight change (lb)	9.4 ± 0.9	1.1 ± 0.9	0.8 ± 0.9	-2.0 ± 1.1	-1.6 ± 1.1
Blood glucose (mg/dL)	15.0 ± 2.8	6.8 ± 2.5	6.7 ± 2.0	5.2 ± 2.0	2.3 ± 3.9
Glycosylated hemoglobin (%)	0.41 ± 0.09	0.05 ± 0.05	0.08 ± 0.04	0.10 ± 0.06	-0.10 ± 0.14
Cholesterol (mg/dL)	9.7 ± 2.1	5.3 ± 2.1	-2.1 ± 1.9	0.5 ± 2.3	-9.2 ± 5.2
Triglycerides (mg/dL)	42.9 ± 8.4	19.2 ± 10.6	-2.6 ± 6.3	8.3 ± 11.5	-18.1 ± 9.4

^aData from Lieberman et al.⁶⁵

Abbreviation: CATIE = Clinical Antipsychotic Trials of Intervention Effectiveness.

Table 4. Atypical Antipsychotics and Metabolic Syndrome^a

Drug	Weight Gain	Risk for Diabetes	Worsening Lipid Profile
Clozapine	+++	+	+
Olanzapine	+++	+	+
Risperidone	++	D	D
Quetiapine	++	D	D
Aripiprazole ^b	+/-	-	-
Ziprasidone ^b	+/-	-	-

^aReprinted with permission from the American Diabetes Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and the North American Association for the Study of Obesity.⁶⁷^bNewer drugs with limited long-term data.

Symbols: + = increase effect, - = no effect, D = discrepant results.

glycosylated hemoglobin, were observed in the CATIE study, as shown in Table 3.⁶⁵ Increases in fasting plasma triglycerides can be an indicator of insulin resistance, and CATIE patients randomly assigned to olanzapine experienced a 40 mg/dL increase in triglycerides. Patients randomly assigned to ziprasidone demonstrated a decrease in triglycerides, and because ziprasidone is not a lipid-lowering agent, this decrease may indicate the removal of previous adverse effects or a correction of preexisting dyslipidemia.

CONCLUSION

Individuals with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder have a higher prevalence of modifiable metabolic syndrome risk factors such as obesity, compared with the general public, which results in increased morbidity and mortality from related medical conditions. Increased adiposity is associated with increases in insulin resistance, increasing risk for hyperglycemia, hypertension, dyslipidemia, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes mellitus, which may also contribute to cognitive dysfunction. Even modest interventions in any one of the independent risk factors can result in significant clinical benefits.⁶⁸ For example, lowering blood cholesterol by 10% results in a 30% decrease in risk for coronary heart disease. Decreasing blood pressure by 6 mm Hg (> 90 mm Hg in diastolic pressure) in patients with hypertension can decrease the risk for coronary heart disease by 16% and stroke by 42%. Cigarette smoking cessation decreases the risk of coronary heart disease by

50%, even in elderly patients. Maintaining a BMI of ≤ 25 results in a 35% to 55% reduction in the risk for coronary heart disease. Finally, an active lifestyle that includes one 20-minute walk per day can result in a 35% to 55% reduction of coronary heart disease.⁶⁸ Recent research^{63,65-67} has shown that increases in these risk factors may be attributable to certain pharmacotherapies used to treat these patients, while alternate pharmacotherapies may either avoid that risk or even lead to improvements in metabolic variables. The principles of primary prevention suggest the importance of interventions to promote active and healthy lifestyles in order to substantially reduce the risks for disease.

Drug names: aripiprazole (Abilify), carbamazepine (Tegretol, Equetro, and others), clozapine (Clozaril, FazaClo, and others), lithium (Eskalith, Lithobid, and others), olanzapine (Zyprexa), quetiapine (Seroquel), risperidone (Risperdal), valproic acid (Depakene, Myproic Acid, and others), ziprasidone (Geodon).

Disclosure of off-label usage: The author has determined that, to the best of his knowledge, no investigational information about pharmaceutical agents that is outside U.S. Food and Drug Administration–approved labeling has been presented in this article.

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