Side Effects of Fibromyalgia Medications

by SARAH BORIEN

Fibromyalgia Medications and Their Side Effects

I'm convinced one of the most painful experiences a fibromyalgia patient can go through is the time spent creating a treatment plan. We're all on different medication, we've tried about 10 different pills and we'll no doubt try about 10 more.

Once upon a time, somewhere between medication number four and five, I told my doctor the pills she had prescribed made me vomit. Not occasionally, but constantly. I asked her if we could try something else and she sighed, looking completely jaded. Then she said this:

"Sarah, you have a lot of pain, which means you need a high dosage of medication. Whatever you take, you're going to have side effects and it's up to you to decide which side effects you can cope with and which you can't."

I hated that woman. There was no empathy, there was no support. I felt like I was supposed to apologize, take my old medication back and carry on puking.

The thing is, her words have stayed with me all these years and I think she might have been right. I'm currently taking amitriptyline, a tricyclic that's common among fibromyalgia users and, like most medication, it has its good and bad points.

Today I thought I'd share my fibromyalgia medication journey so far, along with some tips for how to get the best out of your treatment plan.

The Beginning

When I was first diagnosed, I was prescribed diazepam. It's a benzodiazepine and its primary indication is anxiety, but it's used to treat muscle spasm.

Unfortunately, your body and mind gets used to the drug and so the dosage must be increased every four weeks to keep its impact. The higher the dosage, the more spaced out you become.

There was a time when I was on a lot of diazepam, which meant I was spaced out and tired all the time. I drank energy drinks to keep me awake and alert, and it was a messy combination.

Interestingly, once of the side effects of this medication that treats anxiety is… wait for it… anxiety! If my tiredness didn't make me want to spend all day in bed, my anxiety sure did.

Needless to say, this is not a sustainable treatment plan and I didn't stay on diazepam for long.

The Messy Middle

After I came off diazepam, I tried a number of fibromyalgia medications in different medication groups. To be honest, I can't remember most of them but I remember that nothing helped the pain, and the side effects were unbearable.

After three or four medications I tried amitriptyline, increasing the dosage in small quantities, but soon became so foggy I could barely function.

I came off amitriptyline and this time decided to do some research. I'd read that anticonvulsants like pregabalin and gabapentin helped some fibromyalgia patients. Their first indication is epilepsy, but recent research showed it helped the muscle spasm in chronic pain.

I had to ask — almost beg — my doctor to give this a try, as it's an expensive medication in the U.K. Eventually he agreed, but unfortunately it didn't help the pain. On the plus side, it didn't have any negative side effects. Every cloud…

The Present

I became a bit exhausted after that. Two years of trying medication after medication became draining and those jaded words from the doctor came back to me. So, I accepted defeat and went back to amitriptyline. It had been best for pain and I just needed to find a balance between grogginess and pain-free-ness.

Deciding on a treatment plan is one of the worst things a fibromyalgia patient can go through. And it doesn't stop; there is always new research, new medication, new doctors and new opinions.

Here are my top three tips for creating a better treatment plan:

Keep up to Date

The more you know, the more chance you have of taking advantage of advances in medicine. Your doctor won't call you to suggest a new treatment plan (and if he/she does, I want their name and number!) so you need to be aware of what's happening in the medical community around you.

Talk to Your Doctor

When you go to see your doctor, it needs to be a two-way conversation. Too often I go to my appointment ready to listen; I wait for the instructions and the recommendations, instead of taking control of the conversation.

Keep Records

As demonstrated by this article, it's really difficult to keep track of your treatment plan over the years. Get a notebook and write down everything you learn about medication, every time you see the doctor and every side effect your experience. It's a lot of work, but it's totally worth it.