Practical Psychopharmacology of Autism Spectrum Disorders

Christopher J. McDougle, M.D.
Director, Lurie Center for Autism
Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics
Massachusetts General Hospital and MassGeneral Hospital for Children
Nancy Lurie Marks Professor
Harvard Medical School

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Off-Label Use Of Medication

In this presentation, all discussion of use of medication refers to “off-label” use other than risperidone and aripiprazole for irritability in children and adolescents with autistic disorder.

Evaluation

- Diagnosis
- Physical Examination
- Neuropsychological Testing
- Genetic Testing
- Electroencephalogram (EEG) and/or Brain Imaging (CAT scan or MRI scan)
Treatment Options

- Behavior therapy
- Speech and Language therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Physical therapy
- Social skills therapy
- Special educational services (academic vs. life skills track)
- Treatment of comorbid medical problems, including seizures
- Vocational training
- Pharmacotherapy

Target Symptoms for Medication

- Motor hyperactivity and inattention
- Interfering ritualistic behavior
- Aggression, self-injury, severe tantrums
- Mood disturbances: depression, bipolar
- Anxiety
- Others: sleep disturbances, pica, inappropriate sexual behavior
Motor Hyperactivity and Inattention

- Psychostimulants: methylphenidate, dextroamphetamine
- Alpha-2 agonists: guanfacine, clonidine, Intuniv
- Non-stimulants: atomoxetine, bupropion, tricyclic antidepressants

Psychostimulants

- Work quickly
- Side effects: reduced appetite, insomnia, tics
- May cause behavioral worsening
- May need to be given multiple times per day
- Need new prescription each month
Alpha-2 Agonists

- Need to monitor blood pressure and heart rate
- Can be sedating
- Generally don’t make symptoms worse
- 2/3 need to be given 2-3 times per day
- Intuniv now FDA-approved for ADHD in children

Non-Stimulants

- Atomoxetine: effective in ADHD; preliminary studies in developmental disabilities. May take longer to work than stimulants. Generally won’t make tics worse. May help with comorbid mood and/or anxiety.
Non-Stimulants (Cont’d)

• Bupropion: has been shown to be effective for ADHD. Not well-studied in developmental disabilities. Can lower the seizure threshold and should NOT be given to a patient with a history of seizures or active seizure disorder. Can make tics worse.

Non-Stimulants (Cont’d)

• Tricyclic antidepressants: not well-studied in developmental disabilities. Associated with side effects including: dry mouth, blurry vision, constipation. Can lower the seizure threshold. Can affect cardiac rhythm.
Ritualistic Behavior

- Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)
  - Fluoxetine
  - Fluvoxamine
  - Sertraline
  - Paroxetine
  - Citalopram
  - Escitalopram

SSRIs

- Data indicate SSRIs may be more effective in post-pubertal vs. pre-pubertal individuals with developmental disabilities
- Side effects: insomnia, sedation, stomach upset, sexual dysfunction, weight gain
- Can generally be given once a day
- Concern about increasing suicidal thinking/behavior
Aggression Severe Tantrums/Self-Injury

- Typical antipsychotics
- Atypical antipsychotics
- Mood stabilizers
- Alpha-2 agonists
- Naltrexone

Aggression (Cont’d)

- Typical Antipsychotics
  - Haloperidol
  - Thioridazine
  - Chlorpromazine
- Side effects: acute extrapyramidal symptoms (EPS), tardive dyskinesia (TD), sedation, weight gain, drooling
Aggression (Cont’d)

- Atypical Antipsychotics
  - Clozapine
  - Risperidone
  - Olanzapine
  - Quetiapine
  - Ziprasidone
  - Aripiprazole
  - Paliperidone

Clozapine

- Common side effects include weight gain, sedation, drooling
- Can lower the seizure threshold
- Agranulocytosis and need for careful blood monitoring
Risperidone

- Well-studied in autism (FDA approval) and mental retardation associated with behavioral dyscontrol
- Common side effects: weight gain, sedation (transient), drooling, elevated prolactin

Olanzapine

- Only small controlled studies in developmental disabilities
- Common side effects: weight gain (at times significant), has been associated with glucose and lipid dysregulation, sedation
Quetiapine

- No controlled studies in developmental disabilities
- Common side effects: weight gain (may be less prominent than with clozapine and olanzapine), sedation, orthostatic hypotension if dose increased too quickly

Ziprasidone

- No controlled studies in developmental disabilities
- Common side effects: sedation (transient), occasional insomnia or behavioral activation. Not associated with significant weight gain
- Should not be given to patients with cardiac problems
- Must be taken with food
Aripiprazole

- FDA-approved for “irritability” in children and adolescents with autism.
- Common side effects: EPS and nausea/vomiting if given at too high a starting dose. Occasionally transient sedation or activation.
- Most weight-neutral other than ziprasidone
- No prolactin elevation

Paliperidone

- Major active metabolite of risperidone
- Potentially fewer drug-drug interactions
- Once daily dosing
- Potentially less weight gain and prolactin elevation
Aggression (Cont’d)

- Mood Stabilizers
  - Valproic acid
  - Lithium
  - Carbamazepine
  - Gabapentin
  - Topiramate
  - Lamotrigine

Valproic Acid

- A controlled study in autism found no drug vs. placebo difference
- Common side effects: sedation, weight gain
- Need to monitor blood level for therapeutic range and to follow liver function tests
- May be useful in patients with seizures and aggression
Lithium

• No controlled studies in developmental disabilities
• Common side effects: tremor, polydipsia, polyuria, weight gain
• Need to monitor blood for therapeutic range and to follow kidney and thyroid function

Carbamazepine

• No controlled studies in developmental disabilities
• Common side effects: dizziness
• Need to monitor blood level for therapeutic range and to follow blood count and sodium level
Gabapentin

- No controlled studies in developmental disabilities
- Common side effects: some sedation, some weight gain
- No need to monitor blood levels
- Not particularly effective on a clinical basis

Topiramate

- No controlled studies in developmental disabilities
- Common side effects: sedation, cognitive dulling. Not associated with weight gain
- No need to monitor blood levels
Lamotrigine

- Controlled study in autism found no drug vs. placebo difference
- Must increase the dose very slowly
- Steven’s – Johnson rash

Aggression (Cont’d)

- Alpha-2 Agonists
  - Guanfacine: not particularly effective for aggression
  - Clonidine: can be effective for aggression. Need to balance sedation vs. clinical benefit
- Need to monitor blood pressure and heart rate
Aggression (Cont’d)

- Naltrexone
  - Not effective on a clinical basis
  - No significant side effects
  - Need to monitor liver function

Mood - Depression

- SSRIs
- Bupropion
- Venlafaxine (elevated blood pressure)
- Mirtazapine (weight gain, sedation)
- Duloxetine
- Tricyclic antidepressants
Mood - Bipolar

- Valproic acid
- Lithium
- Carbamazepine
- Gabapentin
- Topiramate
- Lamotrigine (Steven’s Johnson Syndrome)

Anxiety

- Mirtazapine (weight gain, sedation)
- Buspirone
- SSRIs (low dose)
Sleep Disturbance - Insomnia

- Melatonin
- Clonidine
- Trazodone (priapism)
- Mirtazapine
- Tricyclic Antidepressant (Doxepine, Amitriptyline)
- Choral Hydrate
- Benzodiazepines (Paradoxical rxt'm)
- Dephenhydramine (Paradoxical rxt'n)

Pica

- SSRIs
- Behavioral strategies
Inappropriate Sexual Behavior

- SSRIs
- Hormonal strategies
- Behavioral strategies
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Questions?
LURIE CENTER FOR AUTISM

Christopher J. McDougle, M.D.
CMCDOUGLE@PARTNERS.ORG
(781) 860-1700