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Discontinuation Syndrome

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Definition

Discontinuation syndrome is often described as a group of physiological and psychological symptoms that a person may experience upon the abrupt discontinuation, or reduction in dose, of a variety of pharmacologically active agents. The syndrome may be influenced in time of its onset, severity of its symptoms, half-life, potency, and route of administration of the substance or medication in question. The terms “discontinuation syndrome” and “withdrawal syndrome” are often used interchangeably with one term sometimes being selected over the other due to the implications of the pharmacological agents in question. Substances commonly referred to as drugs of abuse such as alcohol or opiates are commonly associated with withdrawal phenomena; however, medications for medical conditions such as hypertension or psychiatric conditions such as depression (e.g., antidepressants) have more frequently

been associated with a “discontinuation syndrome” perhaps to imply or distinguish them from drugs of abuse. A discontinuation syndrome may occur after a general time frame and exposure to a pharmacological agent has occurred, which is often drug-specific, and has resulted in the development of physical dependence, or tolerance, to the agent. The most common class of psychotropic prescription agents (that are not controlled substances) associated with a discontinuation syndrome today are the SSRIs and SNRIs used for depression and anxiety.

References and Readings

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