



By: Eamonn M. Quigley, M.D., Methodist Hospital and Weill Cornell College of Medicine, Houston; Adapted from article by: William F. Norton, Former Vice President, International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD), Milwaukee, WI; Edited by: William D. Chey, MD, AGAF, FACP, FRCG, RFF, Nostrand Collegiate Professor, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI



International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders ([www.iffgd.org](http://www.iffgd.org))

🕒 Reading time: 6 minutes © Copyright 2015, 2021 by the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders

The goal of taking medications to treat an illness is to help us feel better. When we are ill and looking for relief, the benefit of a treatment is usually the focus. We hear about the benefits of treatments from advertising or from friends and family. From there we often go to healthcare providers looking for advice. But, what about the risk that comes with it? When considering a treatment, you will want to understand and consider the risks as well as the benefits.

Any medicine – prescription, over-the-counter (OTC), dietary supplement, and herbal – can have risks as well as benefits. Benefits are the helpful effects that you get from a drug or other therapy. Risks are the chances that something unwanted or unexpected could happen to you. These are commonly referred to as adverse events or side effects. A side effect could be a minor or a serious event. Sometimes a side effect is unavoidable to achieve a treatment’s benefit.

Understanding and managing risk is an important part of a long-term treatment plan. Taking an active role in building your treatment plan, and working with your healthcare provider, gives you the best chance for a positive outcome.

### What You Can Do

As a patient, talk to your healthcare provider about treatment risk as well as benefit. Here are some examples of questions to ask:

- What is the possible benefit from the drug being prescribed or suggested to you?
- In the context of your personal illness status, what are the chances that you will receive benefit from the treatment?
- How much benefit should you reasonably expect?
- What possible side effects might there be from the treatment?

- In the context of your personal health status, what are the chances that you will experience a side effect or serious adverse event from the treatment?
- What can you do to reduce the chances of side effects?
- How will you know when a side effect occurs?
- Exactly what should you do if a side effect occurs?

In addition, you should consider the severity of your condition. This includes any effect it is having on your life.

### What to Expect from Your Healthcare Provider?

People managing life with a chronic illness often have the best quality of life when they work in partnership with their healthcare provider. Good communication is important and should be done regularly as you work to manage your condition. Here are ways your healthcare provider may help you assess risk and benefit of a treatment.

They can:

- educate you about your disorder; including its natural progression, and treatment options,
- explain the level of benefit your treatment may achieve, and the risk associated with the treatment,
- explain factors that affect both risk and benefit, including prior medical history, multiple medications, or lifestyle choices,
- explain your risks, including what they are and how to reduce them,
- explain how to recognize side effects or adverse events, and what to do when they occur.

### Gaining a Better Understanding

It is important to be well-informed about benefit and risk of a treatment. There are no cures for many gastrointestinal (GI) illnesses. While the search for

improved treatment options continues, we must do our best to understand current therapies.

All medications have inherent risks. Knowing this can help you consider the best treatment options, seek to learn how to manage risk, and achieve positive results. When starting a new medication, let your healthcare provider know the names of all medications (and dosage) that you are currently taking, including supplements, herbal preparations, or over-the-counter medications that you have purchased yourself. It is important that your healthcare provider know about all of these as they could not only have risks but also interact with a new medication. Make sure to inform them of any problems that you may have experienced with medications in the past. They may need details of what exactly happened.

### **Researching medications online**

There are many websites offering information on OTC and prescription medications. Unfortunately, not all of them have accurate up-to-date information. For the most reliable resources, view the manufacturer website or search the FDA Medication Guides. These easy-to-read guides offer general information on side effects and medications. They can be found at FDA Medication Guides ([www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/medication-guides](http://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/medication-guides))

---

### **About IFFGD**

The International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: [www.iffgd.org](http://www.iffgd.org), [www.youandconstipation.org](http://www.youandconstipation.org), or [www.aboutIBS.org](http://www.aboutIBS.org).

### *IFFGD*

537 Long Point Rd, Suite 101  
Mt Pleasant, SC 29464

### **About the Publication**

Opinions expressed are an author's own and not necessarily those of the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). IFFGD does not guarantee or endorse any product in this publication, or any claim made by an author and disclaims all liability relating thereto. This article is in no way intended to replace the knowledge or diagnosis of your doctor. We advise seeing a physician whenever a health problem arises requiring an expert's care.

For more information, or permission to reprint this article, contact IFFGD by phone at 414-964-1799 or by email at [iffgd@iffgd.org](mailto:iffgd@iffgd.org)

*This Fact Sheet is being provided in part, by Allergan and Ironwood Pharmaceuticals, and donors of IFFGD.*