

USING BETA BLOCKERS TO CONTROL PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

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Question: *I have heard that many musicians use beta blockers to control performance anxiety. Are such drugs really effective when used for that purpose? Are they safe?*

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Answer: Performance anxiety is a common problem among professional musicians. In a survey carried out by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, 24 percent of orchestra musicians listed performance anxiety as a problem and 16 percent as a severe problem. More than one-fourth of those surveyed reported having used propranolol or other "beta blockers," more than 80 percent describing only occasional usage. Over 96 percent of those reported that beta blockers were successful in controlling performance anxiety.

A number of studies since the 1970s have looked at the effectiveness of beta blockers in controlling performance anxiety, and almost all have found these drugs to be helpful. The drug reduces the physical accompaniments of performance anxiety, mainly tremor, sweating, and rapid heart action. It does not generally alter the psychological components, except as they relate to the anticipation or fear of developing tremor or other symptoms. However, not all observers agree that the emotional component is spared, and some who have tried these drugs feel that the performance "edge" is flattened.

Beta blockers are safe for most people when taken occasionally for this indication. They can be dangerous for those with asthma or congestive heart failure and can blunt the reaction to low blood sugar in the diabetic. Even though 70 percent of those in the ICSOM survey did so without a prescription, I recommend that anyone contemplating use of these drugs consult a physician beforehand, especially if a special condition, such as pregnancy, diabetes, or chronic lung disease exists. Beta blockers are non-addicting, but psychological dependency can occur. For those who require frequent use, other measures including psychotherapy should be considered.