4.1: Autonomic Nervous System Introduction

Learning Objectives

- Identify the classifications and actions of autonomic nervous system drugs
- Give examples of when, how, and to whom autonomic nervous system drugs may be administered
- Identify the side effects and special considerations associated with autonomic nervous system drugs
- Include considerations and implications of using autonomic nervous system drugs across the lifespan
- Include evidence-based concepts when using the nursing process related to medications that affect the autonomic nervous system
- Identify and interpret related laboratory tests

Have you ever wondered what causes your heart to beat or your lungs to breathe? These are examples of involuntary responses the brain controls without the need for conscious thought. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) works using a balance of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems that regulate the body’s involuntary functions, including heart rate, respiratory rate, digestion, and sweating. Many medications are used to control various cardiovascular, respiratory, and gastrointestinal conditions by acting on ANS receptors. Beta blockers and anticholinergic medications are the most commonly prescribed medications in this category.