

Adults and Antidepressants

Overview

Understanding antidepressants, medications that may be prescribed for depression.

- What are antidepressants?
- Why do doctors prescribe antidepressants for adults?
- What are the different types of antidepressants?
- What are the possible side effects?
- Questions to ask if your doctor recommends an antidepressant
- Stopping an antidepressant

More than 20 million adults suffer from depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). When this condition occurs, a doctor may prescribe one or more antidepressants. These medications have helped many people feel better and keep depression from affecting their work, relationships, and overall enjoyment of life.

If a doctor recommends that you take an antidepressant, you may wonder: Is the medication safe? How long will I have to take it? What are the benefits and the possible side effects? Are there alternatives to taking medication? The best way to find answers is to learn all you can about antidepressants and to talk with your family doctor, psychiatrist, or other specialist about your concerns.

What are antidepressants?

Antidepressants are medications that act on pathways in the brain that affect moods. They help some people feel better by correcting a chemical imbalance in the brain. The American Academy of Family Physicians says that “most antidepressants are believed to work by slowing the removal of certain chemicals from the brain.” These chemicals are known as neurotransmitters, and the brain needs them to function normally. Antidepressants help some people with depression by making these chemicals more available. Antidepressants usually aren’t habit-forming. They can be used alone or with other forms of treatment for depression.

People take medication to manage many different types of conditions, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes. Antidepressants are medications used to treat a chemical imbalance in the brain. There is no need to feel embarrassed or ashamed about taking a medication to treat a physical or mental health condition.

Why do doctors prescribe antidepressants for adults?

Most adults feel sad and “down” at times. But for some people, the low feelings are more intense or go on for longer than usual. The sad feelings may begin to affect an individual’s ability to work, maintain healthy relationships, or enjoy life. They may withdraw from contact with close family and friends or they may find themselves crying for no reason. Some people have trouble concentrating or lose interest in activities they used to like. They may experience unhealthy changes in

their eating or sleeping habits. Or they may try to cope with their sad feelings by abusing drugs or alcohol or behave in ways that concern their friends, family, or employers. They may even begin to think or talk about hurting themselves or others.

Adults who have these symptoms may be experiencing depression, a treatable medical condition. Some people who are depressed benefit from psychotherapy, also known as “talk therapy,” which involves talking with a professional who can help them find ways to cope with painful feelings. Others do better by taking antidepressants or by combining talk therapy and antidepressants.

What are the different types of antidepressants?

There are many types of antidepressants, and each of these tends to act on the brain in a different way. Following are some common types of antidepressants:

- *Tricyclics*. Tricyclics are an older group of antidepressants that are named for their chemical structure. They typically act on several neurotransmitters in the brain. Tricyclics include amitriptyline (Elavil), desipramine (Norpramin), doxepin (Sinequan), imipramine (Tofranil), nortriptyline (Pamelor), protriptyline (Vivactil), and trimipramine (Surmontil). Although these drugs are not commonly used (because of the side effects), they are still very effective.
- *Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)*. SSRIs are newer than tricyclics and affect mainly one neurotransmitter in the brain, serotonin. They include citalopram (Celexa), escitalopram (Cipralex, Lexapro), fluoxetine (Prozac, Prozac Weekly), fluvoxamine (Luvox), paroxetine (Paxil, Paxil CR), and sertraline (Zoloft).
- *Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)*. The medications usually affect the neurotransmitters serotonin and norepinephrine. Some of the SNRIs are duloxetine (Cymbalta) and venlafaxine (Effexor).
- *Norepinephrine and dopamine reuptake inhibitors (NDRIs)*. NDRIs act on the brain chemicals norepinephrine and dopamine. One of the most commonly prescribed NDRIs is bupropion (Wellbutrin, Wellbutrin SR, Wellbutrin XL).
- *Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)*. MAOIs are used to treat people with serious depression, and some other conditions, who can't take SSRIs or tricyclics. Some of the MAOIs are isocarboxazid (Marplan), phenelzine (Nardil), and tranylcypromine (Parnate).

Each antidepressant has its own benefits, so your doctor may want to try more than one before deciding which is best for you. Medications for depression are often picked individually, depending on other symptoms that accompany the depression. Ask your doctor which type of medication he or she is prescribing so that you can learn more about that class of medication.

What are the possible side effects?

Every antidepressant works in a different way and has a different set of potential side effects. These are often mild or temporary. But it's essential to let your doctor know about any effects that bother you, seem unusual, or affect your ability to function because these reactions may be the sign of a serious problem. Here are some of the most common side effects for different groups of antidepressants, according to the NIMH:

- *Tricyclics* may cause dry mouth, constipation, bladder problems, blurred vision, dizziness, drowsiness, and an increased heart rate.
- *Newer antidepressants, including SSRIs*, may cause sexual problems, headaches, nausea, nervousness, insomnia, and agitation or “the jitters.” The side effects may be worse if you also take other drugs that affect serotonin. In rare cases, combining medications such as an SSRI and an MAOI may cause a potentially fatal condition called “serotonin syndrome.” Signs of this condition include fever; confusion; rigid muscles; and heart, liver, or kidney problems.
- *MAOIs* taken in combination with decongestants and some foods, such as many cheeses, wines, and pickles, may cause a sharp increase in blood pressure that can lead to a stroke. If you take an MAOI, your doctor should give you a list of all the foods and drinks you must avoid, and you should keep it with you at all times. You should also avoid taking other antidepressants with MAOIs because of the risk of serotonin syndrome.

Some studies have found that people who take antidepressants may face an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. For this reason, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that adults who take antidepressants be watched closely for signs of these thoughts or behaviors. You can learn more about this recommendation at www.fda.gov. It's essential to get in touch with your doctor right away if you take one or more antidepressants and your depression seems to be getting worse.

The NIMH advises that you also follow these guidelines while taking an antidepressant:

- *Never mix medications without consulting your doctor*, whether you are taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs or herbal supplements. Remember that some drugs that are safe when taken alone can cause dangerous and, in rare cases, fatal, side effects if mixed with others.
- *Never borrow an antidepressant or other medication from someone else*. Prescriptions for antidepressants are individualized, and someone else's medication may lead to a severe reaction in your body's chemistry.

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- *Tell other professionals who may give you medications, such as a dentist, what drugs you are taking and their dosages.*
- *Don't drink alcohol (wine, beer, or hard liquor) without discussing this with your doctor.* Under some conditions, your health care provider may permit you to drink a small amount of alcohol while taking a newer antidepressant. But it's vital to talk with your doctor about this because your medication may increase the power of a drink (so that one drink may have the effect of two).
- *Let your health care provider know about any other medical therapies you are using along with antidepressants.* This should include going to a chiropractor, undergoing acupuncture, or massage therapy. Although providers of these alternative therapies may tout successes in treating depression, because of the chemical imbalances that lead to depression the usage of alternative therapies may have limited objective effectiveness.

Questions to ask if your doctor recommends an antidepressant

Antidepressants are usually used to treat depression, but a doctor may also prescribe them for other conditions. So if your doctor recommends an antidepressant, the first question to ask is: What condition will the drug treat? If the doctor thinks you are depressed and you aren't sure you are, ask for a fuller explanation. What symptoms led to the diagnosis?

You may also want to ask your doctor the following:

- Which antidepressant would be most helpful to me and why?
- What result is the medication intended to achieve? How much improvement do you expect to occur? When should I start to see results?
- Will this medication be covered at a lower co-pay by my insurance company? If not, are there others that can be used with the same effectiveness?
- What kind of track record does the antidepressant have when used to treat my type of depression? If the track record isn't good or if it's mixed, why do you believe it might still be helpful?
- How long will I need to take the antidepressant?
- What are the possible side effects of the medication? How long will they last?
- How will you monitor my condition, and the effects of the antidepressant, while I am taking the medication?
- How will the antidepressant interact with any other prescription or over-the-counter drugs I take?
- Will I need to avoid any particular foods or drinks?

- Will the antidepressant affect other medical conditions I have?
- Will I still be able to do my usual activities? Let the doctor know if your work or life involves any activities that require special concentration -- for example, if you drive a truck, use power tools or machinery, or compete in vigorous sports.

Be honest with your doctor if you have any specific concerns about a drug -- for example, if you're worried about weight gain, sexual side effects, or trouble sleeping. These side effects may be common with some antidepressants but not the one your doctor has recommended for you.

Stopping an antidepressant

Never stop taking an antidepressant without discussing this first with your health care provider, because quitting can cause serious side effects. If you have trouble with your medication, talk with your doctor about your concerns. Your doctor may want to adjust the dose, try another antidepressant, or add another medication or form of treatment that could help to ease your symptoms. If you need to stop taking your antidepressant, your doctor may recommend gradual withdrawal.

Research shows that about two-thirds of people with depression achieve remission, or have their symptoms go away, if they stick with the prescribed treatment. The success rate is much lower for those who drop out of treatment or don't follow the medical advice they received. So it's worth taking the time to work with your doctor to resolve any difficulties that you have with a recommended treatment.

You learn more about antidepressants and other medications that affect your moods at the "Medications" page for the NIMH at www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/medicate.cfm. The program that provided you this publication can give you additional information about coping with depression and using antidepressants.

Finding the right antidepressant is often a process of trial and error because there are so many different medications and possible doses. Don't give up if you don't at first see the results you expected. Instead, talk with your doctor about your options. Managing your depression can make a big difference to your work, relationships, and overall health. It can make you feel better every day and gain a new enthusiasm for dealing with all the challenges that life can bring.

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