

## **Antidepressants: Medicine for Depression**

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### **What are anti-depressants?**

Antidepressants are medicines used to help people who have depression. Most people with depression get better with treatment that includes these medicines.

### **How do anti-depressants work?**

Antidepressants work by slowing the removal of certain chemicals from the brain. These chemicals are called neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters are needed for normal brain function. Antidepressants help people with depression by making these natural chemicals more available to the brain.

### **How long will I have to take an anti-depressant?**

Antidepressants are typically taken for several months. In some cases, however, patients and their doctors may decide that antidepressants are needed for a longer time.

### **Do anti-depressants have side effects?**

Like most medicines, antidepressant drugs can cause side effects. Not all people get these side effects. Any side effects you have will depend on the medicine your doctor has chosen for you. Your doctor will talk to you about your medicine.

### **What are the different kinds of anti-depressants?**

There are many different kinds of antidepressants, including:

- Tricyclic antidepressants (tricyclics)
- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)
- Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)
- Others

### **Tricyclics**

The tricyclics have been used to treat depression for a long time. They include amitriptyline (brand name: Elavil), desipramine (brand name: Norpramin), imipramine (brand name: Tofranil) and nortriptyline (brand name: Pamelor). Common side effects caused by these medicines include

dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, difficulty urinating, worsening of glaucoma, impaired thinking and tiredness. These antidepressants can also affect a person's blood pressure and heart rate.

## **SSRIs**

SSRIs are a newer group of antidepressants and include drugs such as fluoxetine (brand name: Prozac), paroxetine (brand name: Paxil) and sertraline (brand name: Zoloft). These medicines tend to have fewer side effects than the tricyclics. Some of the side effects that can be caused by SSRIs include decreased appetite, nausea, nervousness, insomnia, headache, and sexual problems. People taking fluoxetine might also have a feeling of being unable to sit still. People taking paroxetine might have a dry mouth and feel tired. People taking sertraline might have runny stools and diarrhea.

## **Other anti-depressants**

The most common side effects in people taking venlafaxine (brand name: Effexor) include nausea and loss of appetite, anxiety and nervousness, headache, insomnia and tiredness. Dry mouth, constipation, weight loss, sexual problems, increased blood pressure, increased heart rate and increased cholesterol levels can also occur.

Nefazodone (brand name: Serzone) can give people headaches, blurred vision, dizziness, nausea, constipation, dry mouth and tiredness.

There are newer antidepressants, such as bupropion (brand name: Wellbutrin), mirtazapine (brand name: Remeron), and trazodone (brand name: Desyrel). Bupropion can cause agitation, insomnia, headache and nausea. Mirtazapine can cause sedation, increased appetite, weight gain, dizziness, dry mouth and constipation. The most common side effects of trazodone are sedation and nausea.

## **Will anti-depressants affect my other medicines?**

Antidepressants can have an effect on many other medicines. If you're going to take an antidepressant, tell your doctor all the other medicines you take, including over-the-counter medicines. Ask your doctor and pharmacist if any of your regular medicines can cause problems when combined with an antidepressant. When taken together, some medicines can cause serious problems. For example, the antidepressant nefazodone can interact with the allergy drug astemizole (brand name: Hismanal). This could cause heart arrhythmias (irregular heart beats). Therefore, nefazodone should usually not be taken with astemizole.

Taking an MAOI antidepressant at the same time as any other antidepressants or some over-the-counter medicines can cause a dangerous reaction. Some foods also need to be avoided while you are taking an MAOI. MAOIs include phenelzine (brand name: Nardil) and tranylcypromine (brand name: Parnate). If you are taking a MAOI and

your doctor wants you to start taking one of the other antidepressants, he or she will have you stop taking the MAOI for a while before you start the new medicine. This gives the MAOI time to clear out of your body.

*This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.*

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