

Depression - how medication can help

What is depression?

Depression is a medical illness, like diabetes or high blood pressure. Depression is common and can be distressing and stop you from doing and enjoying your usual activities. Every year, around 6% of all adult Australians are affected by a depressive illness. It's twice as common in women as in men. It may take some months to fully recover from a major depression. The symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad most of the day, nearly every day,
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Lack of energy
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or guilt
- Not being able to concentrate or make decisions
- Thoughts of death and suicide



What causes depression?

The exact cause of depression is not known. Depression is often caused by a combination of genetic, psychological and environmental factors. Doctors think these may lead to a chemical imbalance in the brain. Two neurotransmitters,

called serotonin and noradrenaline, are responsible for your moods (how you feel). It is known that one or both of these neurotransmitters is not as effective or active in the brain when someone is depressed.



Treatments for depression

Treatments include antidepressant medicines and talking treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Treatment takes time to work but has a good chance of success. Some people have recurring episodes of depression and require long-term treatment to keep symptoms away. Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) can be effective for those who are experiencing particularly severe depression, which is resistant to medication.

How do antidepressants work?

Most antidepressants increase the level of neurotransmitters (serotonin and noradrenaline) in the brain. Neurotransmitters are needed for normal brain function.



Key points that you should know

- You need to take an antidepressant regularly for several weeks to begin to get the full effect
- Treatment with antidepressant should continue for six months after full recovery after a single episode of depression. Some people may require longer term treatment if they have had multiple episodes
- Antidepressants are:
 - ◉Effective and non addictive
 - ◉Effective in preventing recurrence and relapse when taken long term
 - ◉Not known to cause long-term side effects
 - ◉Suddenly stopping an antidepressant can lead to unpleasant discontinuation effects. The medication needs to be reduced slowly under the supervision of a doctor.



What are the different types of antidepressant?

There are several types of antidepressants. They are put into groups according to which chemicals they affect in the brain. While all the antidepressants are equally effective, one may

suit you better than another. This is a brief guide to antidepressant medication.



Tricyclic Antidepressants (TCAs)

TCAs inhibit the reabsorption of serotonin and noradrenaline by brain cells. They also block other cell receptors, which accounts for many of their side effects. They were among the earliest antidepressants developed and are highly effective. TCAs have more side effects than newer drugs and are best avoided in people with severe heart disease and the elderly. They are potentially fatal in overdose.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Amitriptyline	Endep	Drowsiness
Clomipramine	Anafranil	Dry mouth
Dothiepin	Prothiaden or Dothep	Blurred vision Urinary retention
Doxepin	Deptran	Dizziness
Imipramine	Tofranil	Weight gain
Nortriptyline	Allegron	Sexual dysfunction
Trimipramine	Surmontil	Constipation Rapid heart rate (tachycardia) and other heart arrhythmias



Selective Serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)

SSRIs are a popular class of antidepressants medication. They block the reabsorption of serotonin by certain nerve cells in the brain. SSRIs are called selective because they seem to

affect only serotonin, not other neurotransmitters. Generally, SSRIs have fewer side effects than the older drugs.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Citalopram	Cipramil	Nausea, vomiting,
Escitalopram	Lexapro	Dyspepsia,
Fluoxetine	Lovan, Prozac	abdominal pain
Fluvoxamine	Luvox	Diarrhoea,
Paroxetine	Aropax	Rash,
Sertraline	Zoloft, Xydep	Sweating Agitation, anxiety Headache, Insomnia Tremor, Sexual dysfunction



Serotonin and Noradrenaline reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)

SNRIs increase the levels of both serotonin and noradrenaline by inhibiting their reabsorption into the brain cells. Higher levels of these neurotransmitters in the brain enhance mood.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Venlafaxine	Effexor, Effexor XR	Nausea, vomiting Dizziness, Insomnia, abnormal dreams
Duloxetine	Cymbalta	Sweating, Constipation Tremor, agitation Headache, Sexual dysfunction
Desvenlafaxine	Pristiq	

Noradrenalin and specific serotonergic antidepressant (NaSSAs)

Mirtazepine (Avanza) is the only drug in this group currently available. It increases the amount of noradrenalin and serotonin in the brain. NaSSAs also act as an antihistamine which is why common side effects include sedation and weight gain. NaSSAs are particularly helpful when there are problems with anxiety or difficulty sleeping.

Mono-amino oxidase inhibitor (MAOIs)

MAOIs prevent the enzyme monoamine oxidase from metabolising the neurotransmitters noradrenaline, serotonin and dopamine. They increase the level of these transmitters in the brain, improving mood. MAOIs are used less commonly than other antidepressants. They require that you must watch your diet. Some foods are not agreeable with these drugs and can cause dangerous rises in blood pressure. You should not take an MAOI unless you clearly understand what medications and foods to avoid. You must only do this under medical supervision.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Phenelzine	Nardil	Dizziness, low blood pressure,
Tranylcypromine	Parnate	drowsiness,
Moclobemide (reversible inhibitor of MAO)	Aurorix, Mohexal	insomnia, headaches, oedema, blurred vision, weight gain, dangerous rise in blood pressure



Suicidal feelings and antidepressants

Antidepressants may increase the risk of suicide in young people particularly in children and adolescents. It is most likely to occur during the first few weeks of treatment or when you change the dosage. If your depression gets worse or you are thinking about hurting yourself, please talk to your doctor or service coordinator, contact the local Mental Health Crisis Team or Mental Health Triage Line (1800 636 825), or go to your local Emergency Department.

Antidepressants and pregnancy

Pregnancy does not protect against depression. Relapse rates are high in those with a history of depression who discontinue medication. It is important for women who suffer from depression and want to have a baby to talk the various risks over with their doctor and decide what is best and safest for themselves and their baby.



Discontinuation syndrome

Antidepressants are not considered addictive but ceasing treatment abruptly can make you feel sick. Symptoms that you may experience include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Flu-like symptoms
- Feeling tired

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- Anxiety, irritability

Antidepressant discontinuation syndrome is not life threatening and usually goes away within 1 or 2 weeks. If you have decided to stop taking your antidepressants, you need to talk to your doctor so that you can gradually taper off.



Serotonin syndrome

Serotonin syndrome is a rare but serious drug reaction. Most antidepressants increase the amount of serotonin in brain. If level of serotonin goes too high in brain it can cause serotonin syndrome. It can occur when two different types of antidepressants are taken together. It may happen particularly when SSRIs interacts with MAOIs. Serotonin syndrome needs immediate medical treatment. Signs and symptoms include:

- Confusion, hallucinations
- Restlessness, agitation
- Increased heart rate, fluctuations in blood pressure
- Fever
- Nausea and vomiting
- Seizures



Antidepressant medications offer a number of safe and effective treatment choices for people suffering from depression. Antidepressant medications are also generally very effective in

the treatment of anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder.



This brochure contains general information and does not include all possible side effects or all brand names of medications.

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