

Frequently Asked Questions about Antidepressant Medications

How do antidepressant medications work?

Antidepressants affect the balance of chemicals in the brain that affect mood. These are called neurotransmitters. However, research has not clarified exactly how antidepressants work.

Are antidepressants addictive?

No. They are not habit – forming and do not produce a “high.” Once you reach a dose that works for you, you do not require ever increasing doses to maintain the beneficial effect.

Will I get better if I take an antidepressant?

Antidepressant medications are proven to improve mood for most people with moderate or severe depression. Combining antidepressant medication with psychotherapy is even more effective. For mild depression, many people may improve with supportive counseling and active follow up from their primary care physician. If mild depression persists, then antidepressant medication and / or psychotherapy are usually effective. For all levels of depression, healthy lifestyle is important. This include eating healthy foods, sleeping and exercising regularly, engaging in pleasurable activities, using stress reduction techniques, and sharing your thoughts and concerns with supportive friends or family.

How long will it take for the antidepressant medication to work?

People usually start to feel better two to four weeks after starting an antidepressant. Sleep and appetite may improve first, but it may take longer for your mood and energy to improve. If your depression is not improved after a few weeks, your doctor may suggest adding psychotherapy (if you are not already doing this), increasing the dose or switching to another medication.

Are there any side effects from antidepressants?

Side effects are usually mild. Please read the package insert that comes with your prescription. Some antidepressants may make you feel jumpy or jittery for a few days, but these feelings usually fade quickly. Some may cause sleepiness or dry mouth. Nausea may occur, but this usually resolves one to two weeks of starting medication. Some medications make it difficult to achieve orgasm. If side effects are troublesome or persist after the first week, please contact your doctor to discuss. If you find yourself with racing thoughts or new anxiety or worsening depression after starting an antidepressant, please contact your doctor promptly.

How long should I take the antidepressant?

Once your symptoms are gone, we recommend that you stay on the medication for six to nine months to prevent depression from returning. People with previous episodes of depression usually need a longer course of treatment to prevent recurrence.

How often should I see my doctor while taking an antidepressant?

Please discuss this with your prescribing physician. The frequency depends on your situation and symptoms. Do keep all your appointments. Please call your doctor for any concerns about worsening symptoms or possible side effects.

What should I do if I forget to take a dose of the medication?

Do not take extra doses in one day if you miss a dose. Take your next dose at the regular time.

Should I avoid alcohol while I'm taking an antidepressant?

Alcohol can cause side effects in people taking antidepressants. Alcohol has a depressant effect on mood, so it can worsen depression. Please discuss this with your physician.

May I take other medications along with an antidepressant?

Antidepressants are safe to take along with many other medications and over the counter remedies and herbs. However, do not take a prescription antidepressant along with St. John's Wort, an herb sometimes used for mild depression. Also, there is more chance of gastrointestinal bleeding if you take an antidepressant along with a non steroidal anti inflammatory drug like ibuprofen or naproxen (eg Motrin[®] or Alleve[®]). Please discuss all medications, supplements and herbs you are taking with your physician and pharmacist.

May I stop the medication once I'm feeling better?

No. Please do not stop taking the medication suddenly without first discussing this with your doctor. If you stop too soon, your depression may return. In addition, some antidepressants must be tapered off slowly, giving your body time to adjust.

Can an antidepressant help with trouble sleeping?

In many cases, poor sleep is linked with depression. As depression improves, sleep often improves also.

Can an antidepressant help with chronic pain?

Some antidepressants may help control certain types of pain, even for those without clinical depression, such as pain from musculoskeletal conditions and nerve pain from diabetes or shingles.

Can an antidepressant help with low energy and fatigue?

Low energy and feeling tired are common symptoms of depression. Once your depression improves, your energy will start to return.

Can an antidepressant help with stress?

Life stresses can cause or worsen depression. Likewise, depression can worsen how you cope with common stresses -- such as from work, family relationships, physical disabilities, or financial worries. Treating depression can help you cope with stress more easily. Of course, addressing and learning to cope directly with the underlying stress is most important.

Can an antidepressant help with anxiety or panic attacks?

Anxiety is often linked to depression. Once depression symptoms improve, anxiety usually improves too. In addition, some antidepressant medications are also "anti anxiety" medications, effective for panic disorder or generalized anxiety disorder even if depression is not present.