Patient Information about Antidepressant Medications

How do antidepressants work?

Both life stresses and medical problems can change chemical messengers in the brain that maintain the balance of how you feel emotionally and physically. This chemical imbalance results in some of the common symptoms of depression such as sleep and appetite problems, loss of energy, poor concentration, and greater sensitivity to pain. Antidepressant medications can help restore a normal balance of these chemical messengers, which helps to relieve emotional and physical symptoms.

Antidepressants can take up to eight weeks to work. It usually takes two to four weeks until people start feeling better emotionally and physically. The improvement may be gradual, and often family members or friends may notice a difference in how you are doing before you do. Your sleep and appetite may improve first, and your mood, energy, and negative thinking may take some more time to improve.

Once you are feeling better, do not stop the medication right away. Your doctor may recommend taking the medication for six to nine months or longer to prevent a relapse of the depression.

How do you find an antidepressant that works for you?

Scientific studies show that antidepressant medications do not differ in the percentage of patients that get better. However, different medications are effective for different people, and the side effects of the medications differ. Some medications also cost more than others. Your doctor can help you decide which medication may be best for you.

Between 50 and 80% of patients will get better after four to eight weeks on an antidepressant medication. By working together, you and your doctor can decide whether the medication you started is the right one for you. If you need to switch to another antidepressant because of side effects or because you are not substantially improved, chances are still excellent that you will improve on a second medication.

What about side effects?

Some people may experience side effects when taking antidepressant medications. While these side effects can be annoying, they are rarely dangerous to your health. They usually occur in the first few weeks and then gradually decrease as your body adapts to the medication. Because of these early side effects, patients sometimes feel a little worse before they start getting better and may give up too soon. If you have side effects that are bothering you, discuss these with your doctor or your depression clinical specialist. Your doctor will help you determine if these side effects will decrease over time or if you should decrease or switch your medication.

Some of the side effects that can occur with antidepressants include:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Headaches
- Insomnia
- Rapid heart rate
- Dry mouth
- Jitteriness
- Sedation
- Temporary difficulty in achieving orgasm
- Constipation
- Weight gain
- Urinary hesitancy
- Other

Remember:
1. Take the medications
2. Keep track of side effects and discuss them with your physician.
3. Antidepressants are not addicting or habit forming. They do not make people “high,” and they do not lead to serious withdrawal symptoms once you stop them.
4. It may take two to ten weeks to feel the full benefits of antidepressants.
5. Continue to take the medication even when you feel better.
6. Don't stop the medications before talking with your primary care provider.

Common questions about treatments for depression

Questions about antidepressant medications:

1. How do antidepressants work?
   - Antidepressants help restore the correct balance of certain chemicals called neurotransmitters in the brain.

2. My problem is inability to sleep. How can an antidepressant help with this?
   - In many cases, poor sleep is a by-product of a major depression. Once the depression lifts, sleep often improves as well.
   - Antidepressants can help restore normal sleep, even in people who do not have major depression. They are advantageous over other sleeping pills in that they are not habit-forming, and they usually do not impair concentration or coordination.
3. I have a problem with pain. How can an antidepressant help with this?

- Some antidepressants have been shown to be successful (even in the absence of major depression) in a number of pain conditions such as diabetic neuropathy, postherpetic neuralgia, and phantom limb pain.

- Antidepressants may also help restore normal sleep and “reverse” a vicious cycle of pain and poor sleep.

4. I have low energy and feel tired a lot of the time. How can an antidepressant help with this?

- Low energy and fatigue commonly occur in people with major depression. Once the depression improves, their energy starts to return as well.

- Antidepressants can help restore energy in patients who are depressed. With successful treatment, patients will feel less tired and more able to do their usual activities.

5. I have a lot of stress in my life. How can an antidepressant help with this?

- Life stress can cause or worsen the symptoms of depression. The depression can then worsen the impact of such stressors (such as work stress, family problems, physical disabilities or financial worries) and your ability to cope with them. Treating the depression can help some patients break out of this vicious circle.

6. Are antidepressants addictive?

- No. Antidepressants are not habit-forming or addictive. They do not produce a “high” feeling, but slowly alter the amount of certain chemicals called neurotransmitters in the brain over a number of weeks. Restoring the levels to a more normal balance usually brings the depression under control.

- Some people have been taking antidepressants continually for up to 30 years without any significant (physical or psychological) adverse effects.

7. My problem is anxiety or panic attacks, not depression. How can antidepressants help?

- In many cases, anxiety is a by-product of depression. Once the depression lifts, the anxiety improves as well.

- Some antidepressant medications are also among the most effective medical treatments for anxiety disorders, including panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

8. How long will it take the medications to work?

- It usually takes from one to six weeks for patients to start feeling better. In many cases, sleep and appetite improve first. It may take a little longer for your mood, energy, and negative thinking to improve.

- If the depression has not improved after four to six weeks, you may need an increase in the dose or a change to another antidepressant.

9. How long will I have to take the medication?

- Once you are completely recovered from your depressive episode, you should stay on the medication for another six months to prevent a relapse.
Some patients who have had previous depressive episodes or are otherwise at high risk for a recurrence should be kept on a "maintenance" dose of antidepressants for longer periods of time.

10. Are there any dangerous side effects?

- Side effects from antidepressants are usually mild. You should ask your doctor or depression clinical specialist (who will coordinate with your doctor) what to expect and what to do if you have a problem.

- In many cases, your body will get used to the medication and you won't be bothered with the side effect for long. In other cases, your doctor may suggest that you lower the dose, add another medication, or change to another antidepressant. If used properly, there are no dangerous or life threatening side effects.

11. Is it safe to take antidepressants together with alcohol or other medications?

- In general, antidepressants can safely be taken with other medications. You should let your doctor or depression clinical specialist know exactly which other medications (including over-the-counter medications) you are taking so that he/she can make sure that there are no problems.

- Antidepressants can increase the sedating effects of alcohol. Be careful to avoid excessive alcohol intake while on these medications.

12. What should I do if I miss the medication one day?

- Don't "double up" and take the dose you forgot. Just keep taking your medication as prescribed each day.

13. Can I stop the medication once I am feeling better?

- No You would be at high risk for having the depression come back, and may experience some temporary withdrawal symptoms. After one episode of depression, there is a 50% risk that the depression will return. After two episodes, the risk goes to 70%; and after three episodes, the chances are 90 % that you will have a recurrence if you stop using the medication. In most cases, you should continue the medication for at least six months after you and your doctor agree that your recovery is complete.

- DON'T STOP THE MEDICATION BEFORE DISCUSSING IT WITH YOUR PHYSICIAN OR DEPRESSION CLINICAL SPECIALIST.

14. Will I get better?

- With adequate treatment, between 50 and 80% of patients will have a complete recovery. Should you not respond to the first antidepressant treatment you try, there is an excellent chance that you will respond favorably to another medication or to psychotherapy.

* Rost K. "Depression Tool Kit for Primary Care" NIMH grant MH54444. (Prototype).
(for more information, see www.depression-primarycare.org)