

Frequently asked questions about antidepressant medications

Q. How do antidepressants work?

A. Antidepressants help restore the correct balance of important chemicals (called neurotransmitters) in the brain that affect a person's mood.

Q. Are antidepressants addictive?

A. No, absolutely not. Antidepressants are not addictive or habit-forming, and they do not provide a "high."

Q. Will I get better if I take the antidepressant?

A. According to the World Health Organization, adequate antidepressant treatment is effective for 50% to 80% of people with depression. If you do not feel better after taking one antidepressant for an adequate amount of time, there is an excellent chance that you will respond more favorably to a different antidepressant. Call your healthcare provider right away if you experience new or sudden changes in mood, behavior, thoughts or feelings.

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

A. People usually start to feel better after taking an antidepressant medication for two to six weeks. In many cases, sleep and appetite improve first. It may take a little longer for your mood and energy to improve. If the depression is not improved after a few weeks, your doctor may want to increase the dose or switch to another antidepressant.

Q. Are there any side effects?

A. Side effects from antidepressants are usually mild. You should ask your doctor or clinical specialist (who will coordinate with your doctor) what you might experience 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 effects 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 side effects.

Q. How long will I have to take the antidepressant?

A. Once your symptoms are resolved, you will need to stay on the medication for at least another 6 months to prevent your depression from returning. Some people who have had previous episodes of depression should stay on anti-depressant medications for longer periods to prevent new episodes of depression.

Q. How often will I need to see my doctor?

A. If you are prescribed an antidepressant medication for depression, it is recommended that your primary care physician or mental health practitioner monitor your treatment closely. In the first 12 weeks, it is recommended that you be seen at least three times.

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

- A. Do not take a double dose to correct for the dose you forgot, without asking your doctor. Take your next dose at the next regular time.

Q. Should I avoid alcohol when I'm taking an antidepressant medication?

- A. Alcoholic beverages can produce side effects in some people taking antidepressants. Therefore, if you intend to have any alcohol while taking antidepressants, it is important for you to discuss this with your physician.

Q. Is it safe to take antidepressants with other medications?

- A. In general, antidepressants can be taken safely with other medications. However, it is very important for your doctor and pharmacist to know the names of all the medications you are taking (including over-the-counter medications) so they can be certain there are no potential medication interactions.

Q. Can I stop taking the medication once I start feeling better?

- A. No. You should not stop taking the medication without first talking with your doctor. If you stop taking the medication too soon, you are at high risk for having your depression return. In addition, some medications must be stopped gradually, to give the body time to adjust. In most cases, you should expect to continue taking the medication for four to nine months after your symptoms have gone away. When the time is right for you to stop taking the medication, your doctor will slowly lower the dose to prevent your symptoms from coming back.

Q. My problem is inability to sleep. How can an antidepressant help with this?

- A. In many cases, poor sleep is linked with depression. Once the depression improves, sleep often improves, as well. Antidepressants can help restore normal sleep, even if you 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.

Q. I have a problem with pain. How can an antidepressant help with this?

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

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

- A. Low energy and feeling tired are common symptoms of depression. Once the depression improves, your energy will start to return. With successful treatment, you will have more energy to do your usual activities.

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

- A. Life stress can cause or worsen depression symptoms. Depression can also worsen how you cope with stress (such as work stress, family problems, physical disabilities, or financial worries) and your ability to handle stressful situations. Treating depression can help you deal with stress more easily.

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

- A. In many cases, anxiety is linked to depression, and once the symptoms of depression improve, the anxiety improves, as well. Also, some antidepressant medications are among the best treatments for anxiety disorders, including panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.