

Antidepressants

This factsheet gives information about antidepressants. They can help with different mental health problems, including low mood, depression, and anxiety. This information is for adults affected by mental illness in England. It's also for their loved ones and carers and anyone interested in this subject.

Key Points.

- Antidepressant medications are used to treat depression, anxiety and other mood disorders.
- There are different types of antidepressants. Your doctor will work with you to find the one that works for you.
- You may get side effects from antidepressants. Talk to your doctor if you get any that cause you problems.
- You may get withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking antidepressant medication. Talk to your doctor before you stop taking them, even if you feel better. They'll advise you of the best way to stop the medication.
- Antidepressants can affect other medications, so tell your doctor about anything else you're taking.

This factsheet covers:

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1. What are antidepressants?

Your doctor may offer you antidepressants if you have very low mood or symptoms of depression. They can also help if you have other mental health problems, including anxiety.¹

Scientists think that antidepressants work by increasing levels of certain chemicals in your brain that are linked to mood and emotion.^{2,3}

Antidepressants should start to work within 2-3 weeks.⁴

There is no set time for how long you should take antidepressants. Your doctor may ask you to take your antidepressants for 6 months after your symptoms are gone.⁵ This can help stop your symptoms coming back. Your doctor will work out how much you should take, and for how long.

Are there treatments for depression other than antidepressants?

Antidepressants aren't the only option available to treat depression. Other treatments you might be offered include:⁶

- physical activity programmes,
- one to one talking therapy or in a group,
- light therapy,
- guided self-help,
- behavioural activation,
- mindfulness and meditation, and
- individual problem-solving.

Some people choose to:

- just take antidepressants,
- take antidepressants together with other forms of treatment or therapy, or
- just use other forms of treatment or therapy.

You can find out more about these treatments, and what you should be offered, in our information about '**Depression**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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2. Are there different types of antidepressants?

All antidepressants work in different ways. One type of antidepressant may suit you more than another. Here, we give an overview of the different types.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)

The NHS say the majority of people will only experience a few mild side effects when taking SSRIs.⁷

All the following SSRIs treat low mood and depression. Some may also treat other conditions, including anxiety, bulimia, panic disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).⁸

There are currently 8 SSRIs prescribed in the UK:⁹

Medication name	Brand name
Citalopram	Cipramil
Escitalopram	Cipralext
Fluoxetine	Prozac or oxactin
Fluvoxamine	Faverin
Paroxetine	Seroxat
Sertraline	Lustral
Dapoxetine	Priligy
Vortioxetine	Brintellix

Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)

SNRIs are similar to SSRIs.¹⁰

Examples of SNRIs include:¹¹

Medication name	Brand name
Duloxetine	Cymbalta, Yentreve
Venlafaxine	Efexor

Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs)

TCAs can be used to treat depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and bipolar disorder. These are an older type of antidepressant, and generally have more side effects than other ones.¹² National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) only recommend the use for the treatment of severe depression.¹³

Below is a list of TCAs.¹⁴

- Amitriptyline,
- Clomipramine,
- Dosulepin or Dothiepin. These can also be branded as Prothiaden or Dothapax,
- Doxepin. This can also be branded as Xepin,
- Imipramine,
- Lofepramine,
- Nortriptyline, and
- Trimipramine.

Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)

MAOIs are an older type of antidepressant and the NHS say:¹⁵

- they're rarely prescribed nowadays, and
- they can cause potentially serious side effects so should only be prescribed by a specialist doctor.

If your doctor prescribes you this medication: ¹⁶

- they should monitor you to see how they affect you,
- you can't eat certain foods, and
- they should give you information about the side effects, risks and what you can't eat.

MAOIs include: ¹⁷

- Isocarboxazid,
- Phenelzine. This is also branded as Nardil,
- Tranylcypromine, and
- Moclobemide. This is also branded as Manerix.

Other medication

Below is a list of other antidepressant medications used to treat mental health conditions.

- Mirtazapine¹⁸. This is also branded as Zispin, and
- Trazodone¹⁹. This is also branded as Molipaxin
- Reboxetine.²⁰ This is also branded as Edronax
- Mianserin hydrochloride. ²¹

SSRIs, SNRIs and TCAs can all be prescribed for pain. TCAs can be used to treat chronic nerve pain. Nerve pain is called neuropathic pain. SSRIs and SNRIs can be used to treat non-neuropathic chronic pain.²²

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3. Are there any side effects?

Different antidepressants will have different side effects. The newer types of antidepressants should have fewer side effects than the older ones. People can have different reactions to medication.

You should get a patient information leaflet with your medication. This leaflet will tell you all the possible side effects you might get. You can get patient information leaflets by searching for the medication on this website:

www.medicines.org.uk/emc

The table below tells you about some of the common or widely known side effects of different types of antidepressants.

Common or widely known side effects	
SSRIs ²³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling or being sick • Problems sleeping • Feeling anxious • Headaches • Diarrhoea • Dizziness • Loss of sex drive • Difficulty reaching an orgasm • Difficulty obtaining or maintaining an erection
SNRIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as SSRIs ²⁴
Tricyclic Antidepressants ²⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dry mouth • Blurred vision • Drowsiness • Weight gain • Constipation
MAOIs ²⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dizziness • Drowsiness • Dry mouth • Constipation • Hallucinations • Headaches • Insomnia

If you get these symptoms, you can talk to your doctor. They may be able to change your dosage or medication.

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4. What if I want to stop taking antidepressants?

It's important you don't stop taking antidepressants suddenly. That's because you can get withdrawal symptoms.²⁷

You should talk to your doctor before stopping your medication. They can help you to reduce the dose slowly. This can help lessen any withdrawal symptoms.

The longer you've been taking antidepressants, the longer it might take to reduce the dose to withdraw.

People can respond to coming off antidepressants differently. Some people will have no withdrawal symptoms, but others will. Some common and occasional withdrawal symptoms are shown in the table below.

Common and occasional antidepressant withdrawal symptoms

Antidepressant	Common	Occasional
SSRIs ²⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stomach trouble • Anxiety • Numbness • Ringing in your ears • Fatigue • Dizziness • Problems sleeping • 'Shock-like' feelings • 'Flu-like' symptoms like nausea, headaches, chills and sweating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart racing • Visual disturbances
SNRIs ²⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stomach trouble • Headaches • Anxiety • Dizziness • Numbness • Tremors • Sweating • Disrupted sleep 	
Tricyclic Antidepressants ³⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling dizzy • Sick • Numbness or tingling in the hands or feet • Trouble sleeping • Feeling agitated or anxious • Headaches • Shaking 	
MAOIs ³¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling irritable or agitated • Drowsiness • Problems sleeping • Vivid dreams • Slowed speech and a lack of muscle co-ordination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hallucinations • Delusions

If you get withdrawal symptoms it doesn't mean you can't stop the medication. You might need to withdraw slowly over a longer period.³²

Antidepressants that are usually prescribed by the NHS aren't addictive,³³ but your body can become used to them.

You can find more information on stopping antidepressants from the Royal College of Psychiatrists here: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/treatments-and-wellbeing/stopping-antidepressants

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5. Can other medication, illegal drugs, and food affect antidepressants?

This section is just a summary.

You should tell your doctor or pharmacist about any medicines you take before you start or stop other medications. This is because different medications taken together can affect each other.

You should tell them about:

- other medication that has been prescribed to you for your physical or mental health issues,
- any herbal or complementary medicines you take, including St John's Wort, and
- any over the counter medication you take, especially ibuprofen.³⁴

You can read through the patient information leaflet provided with your medicine before you start taking it. The leaflet is normally in the box that the medication comes in. You can also find medicine leaflets online, on the electronic Medicines Compendium at www.medicines.org.uk.

Can illegal drugs affect me if I take antidepressants?³⁵

The NHS say the use of illegal drugs isn't recommended if you're taking antidepressants. Especially if you're taking a tricyclic antidepressant (TCA). This is because they can cause bad effects.

The NHS say you should especially avoid taking:

- cannabis, especially if you take TCA, as it can make you feel very ill
- amphetamines, also known as speed
- cocaine
- heroin
- ketamine

Illegal drugs can make symptoms of depression or other mental health conditions worse.

It is best to talk to your doctor about any illegal drugs you are taking.

You may be worried about talking to your doctor about your drug use. But doctors are used to talking to people about drug use. And they should keep the information confidential.

They can tell you about the risks of taking the drug while on antidepressants. If you want to stop taking the drug or take less of it, they should be able to advise you on support.

Do any foods affect antidepressants?

Some foods may affect the antidepressants being absorbed. This can alter the effect of your medication. The patient information leaflet provided with your medication will give you a list of these foods. If you're unsure or you want advice you can speak to your doctor.

If you take Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) you have to be especially careful about the foods you eat.³⁶ So, if you are taking this medication, ask your doctor about this.

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6. Can alcohol affect me if I take antidepressants?

You should be careful about drinking alcohol if you're taking antidepressants. This is because alcohol is itself a depressant, so it can make your symptoms worse. It can also increase the side effects of some antidepressants, like drowsiness, dizziness, and co-ordination problems.³⁷

Alcohol is less likely to cause unpleasant effects if you're taking the following types of antidepressants:

- selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), or
- serotonin-noradrenaline reuptake inhibitors (SNRI.)

But the NHS say avoiding alcohol is often still recommended.³⁸

You may become drowsy and dizzy if you drink alcohol while taking the following types of antidepressants:³⁹

- tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs), or
- monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs).

You shouldn't drink certain wines or beers if you are taking MAOIs.⁴⁰ For more information you can ask your pharmacist or doctor.

You can access NHS advice on keeping health risks from alcohol to a low level here: www.nhs.uk/Live-well/alcohol-advice/calculating-alcohol-units

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7. Can antidepressants use affect driving or operating machinery?

Most people who take antidepressants can drive safely. But they can make you feel drowsy, which can affect your reaction time if you're driving.⁴¹ If you feel this way, you shouldn't drive.

For more information you can:

- check with your doctor, and
- read the patient information leaflet that comes with the medication.

You should tell the DVLA if:

- you're taking medication that may affect your driving, or
- you have a medical condition that could affect your driving.

If your antidepressants make you sleepy or slow down your reactions, you shouldn't operate machinery.

You can find out more information about '**Driving and mental illness**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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8. What else should I consider before taking antidepressants?

Can antidepressants affect my sex life?

Taking antidepressants may affect your sex life. They can make you feel tired and can affect your hormones.

Side effects can include:⁴²

- lower sex drive,
- problems with getting an erection, and
- difficulty having an orgasm.

If you are having these problems, talk to your doctor. You might be able to change medication, or the amount you take.

Can I take antidepressants if I'm pregnant?

You can take some antidepressants if you're pregnant, but you should talk to your doctor first. You may want to stay on antidepressants during your pregnancy if you think your symptoms will come back.

Some antidepressants may be better for you during pregnancy than others.

If you're pregnant, some antidepressants can affect the baby.⁴³ Some possible effects can be:⁴⁴

- low birth weight,
- heart disease, and
- pulmonary hypertension. This is high blood pressure in the blood vessels between your lungs and heart.

Talk to your doctor if you're pregnant, or plan on getting pregnant.

Can antidepressants affect breast feeding?

Small amounts of antidepressants can pass into your breast milk. You can talk to your doctor or midwife about the risks and benefits of breastfeeding.

Some antidepressants are better than others if you are breastfeeding. Your doctor can tell you about this.

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Useful Contacts

Bristol Tranquilliser Project

They provide help to people who are having problems with psychotropic medication, such as benzodiazepines, sleeping tablets, and antidepressants. Their helpline is available to those living in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Phone: 0117 950 0020

Address: Suite 5A, Westbury Court, Church Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol BS9 3EF

Website: www.btpinfo.org.uk

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Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

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Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
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Email advice@rethink.org



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Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)

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Don't have access to the web?

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