

# Information About Drugs to Treat Depression



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ValueOptions Depression Series #

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## What are antidepressants and how do they work?

There are certain areas of your brain that control your mood and your feelings. Experts have found that people who are depressed have too little of some of the chemicals that help to send messages between nerve cells in that part of the brain. This may be why people start to feel sadness and other symptoms of depression. The chemicals that seem to be involved are called serotonin, epinephrine, dopamine and norepinephrine. Stressful life events and changes in brain chemistry seem to go together but no one seems to know for sure quite how this works.

Antidepressants increase the levels of these chemicals in the body. This seems to help people feel better. There are different ways of doing this, and so there are several different types of medication. There are currently over 24 different medications used to treat depression. Most depressed people are able to feel better, at least after a period of time, when they take one of these medications. It may take you and your doctor some time to figure out which is the best for you.

## How was my antidepressant chosen?

Your doctor chooses medications based on the symptoms you describe. Your doctor also considers past treatment you may have had. If a relative has been treated for depression and a certain medication has been helpful, your doctor may consider this helpful in choosing a medication for you. Your doctor also considers how side effects

may impact your life, since antidepressants can be very different in the side effects they produce.

People respond differently to medications and different amounts. The medication that works well for friends may not be the medication or amount that works best for you. Different medications require different amounts to be helpful.

## How do antidepressants help?

For many people, antidepressant medications seem to decrease restlessness, improve mood, increase energy, and improve interest in sex. People who take these medications often say they feel more like doing usual activities. They often report having fewer thoughts of death or suicide, and feeling less guilty, happier, and more hopeful. They may also notice they have more normal sleep habits, increased appetite, and are better able to focus on things. Remember, though, not all medicines affect people in the same way. Also, some people are more likely to harm themselves when they have more energy. If you feel that you might do anything to harm yourself, you should contact your doctor or call 911 immediately.

Antidepressant medications can help you feel better and more like doing things you normally do. But antidepressant medications cannot solve certain other problems that can lead to depression. Stressful events often cause or maintain depression. These can include

family and relationship problems, loss of a loved one, stress at work, financial trouble, or serious medical problems.

The best treatment for depression seems to involve medications *and* talking to a mental health therapist. Therapy may help you deal with some of the problems that cause depression. It can also help you learn to change the thoughts and behaviors that may be involved in your depression. We suggest that you ask your doctor about whether or not talking to a mental health therapist might be a good idea for you (along with taking your medication).

#### Common Side Effects of Antidepressant Medications

Antidepressants work best when you take them exactly the way your doctor tells you, every day. The information you give your doctor before and after he or she puts you on an antidepressant is very important to safe and effective treatment. Some people notice short term side effects from antidepressant use.

#### Common side effects include:

- Restlessness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Nervousness
- Nausea
- Blurred Vision
- Constipation
- Sleepiness
- Reduced sexual desire
- Delayed orgasm
- Sweating
- Dizziness
- Shaking
- Dry mouth
- Trouble urinating
- Headache
- Weight gain

A few people (between 3 and 10 percent) notice side effects that are bad enough to change medications. However, in most cases, many of the side effects occur only during the first treatment phase. Dry mouth and

sleepiness, as well as sexual problems, are the most commonly reported side effects. By 2-6 weeks, many may have disappeared. However, in the event that the side effects that you experience do not disappear, or are particularly bad, be sure to discuss them with your physician. If you notice side effects that seem dangerous to your health, you should contact your doctor immediately. The side effects you might feel depend on several things, including the type and amount of medicine you take, your body chemistry, age, other medical problems you have, and additional medicines you may be taking.

If side effects are a problem, do not make changes to your medicine on your own. Your doctor can make several possible changes. Changes can be made to the *type* of medication you take, the amount of medicine you take, the time of day you take your medicine, or how your medicine is taken (such as one single daily dose instead of several smaller doses taken several times a day). Antidepressant medications can also be taken along with medications that reduce side effects. In any case, changing your medicine is a medical decision that should only be made in talking to your doctor.

Antidepressants are not addictive and most experts believe there are few or no long term risks. However, as with all medications, antidepressants are not without some risks. You should talk to your doctor about these risks. Please be sure to tell your doctor if you have a history of substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, or have any medical conditions. Based on your history, your doctor will consider whether any medical problems may be causing your depression.