

## **Antidepressant Medication: What Is It? And How It Works**

### **What causes depression?**

Clinical depression is a disorder of mood, thinking and behavior that affects more than 10 million Americans every year. For some people, depression happens only once in their lives. However, other individuals will have bouts of depression on and off through their lifetime. It is important to understand that depression is not your fault, a sign of personal weakness or that you are “crazy.”

The exact cause of depression is unknown, but involves low levels of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine are neurotransmitters shown to be important in clinical depression. Some people may inherit a tendency to have low levels of these neurotransmitters. In others, severe stress, losses or illness may trigger chemical imbalances that produce depression.

### **What are antidepressants and how do they help my depression?**

Antidepressant medications help increase and rebalance the brain chemicals that affect your mood. The dose you are prescribed has nothing to do with the severity of your depression or your hopes for recovery. Different medications work at 15 mg a day, whereas others work at 200 mg a day.

### **When can I expect to feel better?**

While every person is different, you may notice an improvement in your mood as early as 1-2 weeks after beginning medication, though most medications require 4-6 weeks to take effect.

### **What are the possible side effects of antidepressants?**

You may have different side effects with different medicines, but these often go away within several weeks. Some common side effects include: *dry mouth, nausea, blurred vision, sleep problems, sexual dysfunction, weight changes, anxiety, increased heart rate and dizziness*. Talk to your health care professional if side effects persist or if your depression is not lifting as you anticipated.

### **Can I get addicted to antidepressants?**

Antidepressants are not addictive. However, do not stop taking them abruptly. If you do, you may experience withdrawal effects.

### **How will I know if my antidepressant is working?**

When the medicine is working well, you will notice you are able to meet your day-to-day obligations better, have more energy, sleep better, notice an increased desire to live, take better care of yourself and your appetite will return to normal. Family and friends may even notice these changes before you do.

### **How long will I take the antidepressants?**

The answer depends on how many depressive episodes you have had. If this is the first time you have been treated for depression, you will probably take medication for 6-9 months. Taking medication for 1-2 years is recommended for a second episode and even longer if the depression returns. Longer treatment reduces the likelihood that depression will reoccur.

### **Can I drink alcohol while I am taking antidepressants?**

You should not drink alcohol because it may interact with the medication and make you feel excessively sleepy or dizzy. You can be affected by even a small amount of alcohol.

### **Where can I obtain more information about depression?**

Your health care provider can provide answers to many of your questions. The following agencies may also be helpful:

The National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association  
1-800-826-3632  
<http://www.ndmda.org>

The National Institute of Mental Health  
1-800-421-4211  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Sources: Yudofsky, Stuart, M.D., Hales, Robert, M.D., and Ferguson, Tom, M.D. What You Need to Know About Psychiatric Drugs. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.

<http://www.familydoctor.org/handouts/045.html>  
[http://www.depression.com/tools/health\\_library/treatments/antidepressants.html](http://www.depression.com/tools/health_library/treatments/antidepressants.html)