

Facts about Antidepressant Medications

Introduction

Antidepressant medications are a class of drugs commonly used to treat depression; they are often also prescribed for anxiety. Some of these types of medication were discovered in the 1950's and have since been used extensively with a variety of psychiatric populations. Antidepressants are not a "cure" for psychiatric disorders, but they can provide significant relief from many symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The Clinical Effects of Antidepressant Medications

Antidepressant medications are effective for treating the symptoms of depression, such as low mood, appetite disturbance, sleep problems, low energy, and poor concentration. Some of these drugs are also helpful for treating the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorders. Antidepressants are most often used to treat clients with *major depression* or *obsessive-compulsive disorder* (OCD), although individuals with other disorders (such as agoraphobia and panic disorder) may also benefit from them.

There are two major uses for antidepressant medications:

1. Reducing or eliminating acute (severe) symptoms to a level where the symptoms are more manageable; and
2. Preventing symptom relapses and rehospitalizations.

Reducing Acute Symptoms

When a person has moderate to severe symptoms of depression or OCD, antidepressants are often prescribed. If the individual has already been receiving these drugs, the dosage may be changed or a different medication may be tried. Antidepressants must usually be taken for several weeks before significant clinical effects occur. Some people respond to the first antidepressant they are given. Others may require multiple trials of different antidepressants to find the best medication.

Preventing Symptom Relapses

Some individuals need to take antidepressants for only a limited period of time, such as a few months, and can then stop the medication with no negative effects. Others, however, may need to take these medications on a longer-term basis in order to prevent relapses and rehospitalizations.

Types of Antidepressant Medication

There are many different types of antidepressant medication. These drugs can be divided into four different groups: *serotonin selective reuptake inhibitors* (SSRIs), *tricyclics*, *monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors*, and *other compounds*. The chart on the next page contains the brand names, chemical

names, and average daily oral dosage for some of the most commonly prescribed antidepressant medications.

ANTIDEPRESSANT MEDICATIONS

Type of Drug	Brand Name	Chemical Name	Average Typical Dosage Range (mg/day)
SSRIs	Paxil	paroxetine	20-50
	Prozac	fluoxetine	20-80
	Zoloft	sertraline	50-200
	Serzone	nefazadone	300-500
	Luvox	fluvoxamine	100-200
	Celexa	citalopram	20-40
	Lexapro	escitalopram	10-20
	Pristiq	desvenlafaxine	50-100
	Effexor (regular and extended release)	venlafaxine hydrochloride	225-375
Cymbalta	duloxetine	75-225 40-60	
Tricyclics	Anafranil	clomipramine	25-250
	Elavil	amitriptyline	100-300
	Norpramin	desipramine	100-300
	Pamelor, Aventyl	nortriptyline	50-150
	Sinequan, Adapin	doxepin	75-300
	Tofranil	imipramine	100-300
	Vivactil	protriptyline	10-60
MAO Inhibitors	Marplan	isocarboxazid	10-50
	Nardil	phenelzine	45-90
Other Compounds	Desyrel	trazodone	150-600
	Wellbutrin	bupropion	75-450
	Ludiomil	maptrotiline	75-225
	Serzone	nefazodone	300-600
	Remeron	mirtazapine	15-45

Side Effects

Antidepressant medications, like other drugs for treating disorders, can cause undesired side effects. The most common side effects are summarized in the chart below. Not all people taking medication experience side effects. In many cases the side effects are temporary, although they may persist for some persons. Sometimes the medication dosage needs to be reduced because of side effects or a different type of medication must be given. When side effects are detected, the physician should be consulted as soon as possible.

SIDE EFFECTS OF ANTIDEPRESSANT MEDICATIONS

Drug Class	Side Effects
SSRIs	Nausea, vomiting, excitement, agitation, headache, sexual problems (delayed ejaculation, not experiencing orgasm)
Tricyclics	Dry mouth, dizziness, sedation/agitation, weight gain, constipation, heart palpitations, cardiac abnormalities
MAO Inhibitors	Insomnia, dizziness, weight gain, sexual difficulties, confusion/memory problems, overstimulation, hypertensive crisis
Other Compounds	Sedation/agitation, nausea, seizures, confusion, lightheadedness, flu-like symptoms, skin rash/hives, stiff gait, headache

Hypomania and Mania after Antidepressant Treatment

One occasional side effect of antidepressants deserves special mention. A small percentage of individuals who are prescribed these medications gradually develop the symptoms of *hypomania* or *mania* after a few weeks. The symptoms of hypomania include: irritability or argumentativeness, agitation, decreased need for sleep, and excessive talking. In addition to these symptoms, the symptoms of mania include: grandiosity, euphoria, hostility, extreme goal-directed behavior, and engagement in activities that are potentially harmful.

If these changes in mood and behavior are observed, the physician should be contacted immediately. In most cases, the dosage level of the antidepressant medication can be reduced and the symptoms will go away. Sometimes the medication must be stopped and other drugs used to control the hypomanic or manic symptoms.

Precautions When Taking MAO Inhibitors

People who are prescribed MAO inhibitors must take special precautions to avoid certain foods. Foods that are high in the chemical *tyramine* should be avoided, such as aged cheeses (not including cottage cheese, cream cheese, and processed cheese), aged meats (such as salami and pepperoni), and yeast extracts (except in baked products). The following beverages should also be avoided: beer, Chianti wine, sherry wine, and vermouth. Certain drugs that have "adrenaline-like" effects (such as decongestants and stimulants) should also be avoided when taking an MAO inhibitor. For a more

complete list of foods and beverages that should be avoided or taken in moderation when on an MAO inhibitor, consult the individual's physician.

An unusual side effect of MAO inhibitors is the development of carpal tunnel syndrome, which is due to pyridoxine (B₆) deficiency. This can be corrected by appropriate vitamin supplements (B₆). Early symptoms of B₆ deficiency are numbness and tingling.

How Do Antidepressant Medications Work?

Scientists do not have a thorough understanding of how antidepressant medications work. There is evidence that these medications tend to increase the amount of certain *neurotransmitters* in the brain (chemicals in the nerve cells). Antidepressants appear to affect two neurotransmitters in particular, *serotonin* and *norepinephrine*. Some antidepressants tend to affect one neurotransmitter more than the other. Only those antidepressants that have a major effect on serotonin (such as the SSRIs and Anafranil) improve OCD symptoms. It is possible that the symptoms of depression or OCD (or other disorders that can be treated with antidepressants) are related to imbalances in these neurotransmitters in the brain.

Importance of Regular Medication

Taking medication on a regular basis can help prevent symptoms from returning or getting worse. It can be helpful to take medication at the same time each day so that it is part of the individual's daily routine. It is also important for the person to meet regularly with his or her physician to have symptoms checked, discuss side effects, and have adjustments in medication made when necessary.

Some Words about Suicide

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are common in depression. When an individual is newly prescribed a medication for depression, it can be difficult to tell if an increase in suicidal thoughts is due to the medication or the underlying depression. For the vast majority of individuals, suicidal thoughts, even if they seem urgent at the moment, wax and wane over time and can be dealt with. Be sure to discuss any suicidal thoughts with the mental health care team to make a plan for coping with them and keeping safe. Working with family about these issues can also be very helpful.

Common Questions about Antidepressant Medications

What if the Person Misses a Dose of Medications?

The individual should consult with his or her physician to find out what to do if a dose of medication is missed.

Are Antidepressant Medications Addictive?

Antidepressant drugs are not addictive, but there can be a withdrawal syndrome when individuals stop the medications and it can be uncomfortable. If a decision is made to stop antidepressant medication, the medication is usually tapered gradually to minimize the effects of the withdrawal syndrome. Stopping antidepressant medications may increase the risk of relapse for people with major depression or anxiety disorders.

Do Antidepressants Interact with Other Drugs?

Certain drugs should be avoided when taking an MAO inhibitor: Tegretol, Dopar, Sinemet, Demerol, Aldomet, and Ritalin. MAO inhibitors can also increase the effects of other drugs, including stimulants, sedative, appetite suppressants, and insulin. The physician should be consulted if any of these medications have been prescribed in addition to an MAO inhibitor. Tricyclic antidepressants can decrease the effectiveness of certain antihypertensive medications and increase the sedative effects of alcohol and sedative-hypnotic drugs. Some SSRIs should not be used with some cold and cough medicines. Be sure to talk with the prescriber or pharmacist to be sure none of the prescribed medications interact in a harmful way.

Consult a mental health professional (such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or psychiatric nurse) about any questions you have concerning this handout.

Summary

1. Antidepressant medications can be very helpful in reducing depression and preventing relapse.
2. It is important to take antidepressant medications every day to get their full benefits.
3. In order to avoid withdrawal syndrome, antidepressant medications should usually be stopped slowly.
4. Consult the prescriber about side-effects. These can often be managed.