

Health Information Sheet

Depression -- How Medicine Can Help

What is depression?

Depression is a medical illness like diabetes or high blood pressure. It affects about 17% of people at some time in their lives. It's twice as common in women as in men. Symptoms of depression include the following:

- Loss of interest in things you used to like and enjoy
- Lack of energy
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Weight changes
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness
- Not being able to make decisions
- Thoughts of death and suicide

Is it my fault I'm depressed?

The answer is "no." Depression is an illness, not something you choose to get.

What causes depression?

The exact cause of depression is not known. Doctors think it may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. The imbalance could be caused by your genes. It could be caused by the effects of events in your life. It seems that sometimes there aren't enough chemical messengers (called neurotransmitters) in the brain. These neurotransmitters carry messages (nerve impulses) from one nerve cell to another. When there aren't enough of these messengers in a person with depression, certain messages don't get carried to some areas of the brain.

Two primary messengers, called serotonin (say: seer-o-tone-in) and norepinephrine (say: nor-ep-in-nef-rin), are responsible for your moods (how you feel).

How will my doctor treat my depression?

Depression can be treated with medicines and counseling. The combination of medicine with counseling helps most people. Counseling can help you change a negative view of yourself, of your past and of your future. Regular exercise and avoiding too much caffeine, alcohol and unauthorized substances can also be helpful.

More than 20 medicines are helpful in treating depression. These medicines are called antidepressants. They help increase the number of chemical messengers (serotonin and norepinephrine) that affect your mood.

How does my doctor know which antidepressant is the right one for me?

Your doctor will think about several points when choosing an antidepressant medicine for you:

1. If you had depression before and a certain antidepressant worked well, this might be the best choice of medicine for you again.
2. If any of your brothers and sisters, your parents, uncles or aunts had depression and a certain antidepressant worked well for them, that medicine might be good for you, too.
3. The choice of an antidepressant also depends on your health. Certain antidepressants may have an adverse effect on your individual health issues.
4. Antidepressants may cause side effects. No antidepressant is totally free from side effects. The best medicine for you is the one that gives you the fewest side effects.
5. The choice of an antidepressant also depends on how often you have to take it. The less often you have to take the medicine, the easier it is for you to take.
6. Some antidepressants cost more than others. When possible your doctor will choose less expensive alternatives.
7. An antidepressant should be able to help you with symptoms like sleeplessness, anxiety and lack of energy. Your doctor will want to choose a medicine that will help you right away with these symptoms.
8. If you're taking other medicines, it's important to consider how an antidepressant will work with the other medicines.
9. Some antidepressants don't work well with some foods. Your doctor will guide you about this if necessary.

Are antidepressants tranquilizers? Are they "uppers"? Can I get addicted to them?

"No" is the answer to these questions. These drugs aren't tranquilizers. They don't give you a "high." They aren't addictive.

Can I expect side effects from the antidepressant my doctor gives me?

Yes. All antidepressants have some side effects. But most of the side effects happen in the early weeks of therapy. Most of them go away after a little while.

What are some of the common side effects of antidepressants?

You might have different side effects with different medicines. There are two main kinds of antidepressants: (1) the

tricyclic antidepressants and (2) the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (usually called SSRIs).

Some of the possible side effects of tricyclic antidepressants are the following:

- Dry mouth
- Increased sleepiness
- Hand tremors
- Dizziness when standing up
- Bladder problems
- Constipation
- Weight gain
- Muscle twitching
- "Spaciness"
- Blurred vision
- Excessive tiredness
- Feeling of weakness
- Increased heart rate

You have to be careful if you get sleepy or dizzy when you take tricyclic antidepressants. It's not good to drive or operate machines when you take them, because they affect your reflexes and your attention span.

SSRIs might have the following side effects:

- Nausea
- Sleepiness
- Dry mouth
- Vomiting
- Tremor
- Anxiety
- Diarrhea
- Insomnia
- Sexual dysfunction (inability to ejaculate or to have an orgasm)

What if the side effects don't go away after a little while?

Talk to your doctor. He or she may change your dosage or you might try another medicine, to get rid of the side effects.

How will I know if my antidepressant is working?

If you can sleep better or your mood improves. You know the medicine is working. If you can take care of yourself better (such as hair care, dressing well, eating regularly), you know the medicine is working. When the medicine is working well, you are better able to meet your day-to-day obligations. You have more energy. Your weight problems

will get better, and your appetite will be closer to "normal." You will have an increased desire to live. Both you and your family and friends will notice these changes. Your doctor might also give you short "tests" to check your progress. It may take several weeks to see these benefits.

How long will I take the antidepressant?

If this is the first time you have been treated for depression, you will probably take this medicine for about six months after you begin to feel better again. If this is the second time you've had depression, you might keep taking the medicine for at least a year. Depression that comes back a third time may require you to take an antidepressant for a long time, maybe forever.

What if I forget to take a dose of my antidepressant?

If you forgot your dose less than three hours ago, go ahead and take it now. Otherwise, just skip it. Take your next dose at the regular time. Don't take a double dose unless you ask your doctor first.

Can I drink alcohol when I'm taking antidepressants?

You should not drink alcohol because it might have a bad effect with the antidepressant. You might be strongly affected by even a little bit of alcohol.

How should I stop taking the antidepressant?

All antidepressants should be cut back little by little. This helps to decrease the risk of the depression coming right back. Don't stop taking an antidepressant all of a sudden. Talk with your doctor first.

If I am taking an antidepressant and I get a strong urge to hurt myself, what should I do?

Talk to your doctor right away. If this isn't possible, have someone drive you to the nearest hospital emergency room.

Where can I get more information about depression?

Your doctor is the first person you should talk to. The following agencies can also give you more information:

The national Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association

Public Affairs Department
730 N. Franklin St., Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60610
Telephone: 1-312-642-0049 or
1-800-826-3632

The Depression Awareness, Recognition and Treatment Program of the National Institute of Mental Health

5600 Fishers Lane, Room 10-85
Rockville, MD 20857
Telephone: 1-800-421-4211 or
1-301-443-4140

For Women Only:

Can I take birth control pills while I'm taking an antidepressant?

Yes, antidepressants won't harm the actions or effectiveness of your birth control pill.

If I get pregnant while I am taking an antidepressant, what should I do?

Tell your doctor right away. With some antidepressants, there is a small risk that they will hurt your baby. Your doctor can talk with you about the risks and benefits of your antidepressant.

How long should I stop taking an antidepressant before I get pregnant?

This depends on how long the medicine stays in your body. Some antidepressants stay in your body a long time after you quit taking them. For example, fluoxetine (brand name: Prozac) takes several weeks to leave your body. No matter which antidepressant you have been taking, talk with your doctor before you get pregnant.

Can I breast feed while I am taking an antidepressant?

Most antidepressants would get into your breast milk. This can affect your baby. Before you decide to go on breast feeding and keep taking an antidepressant, ask your doctor if it's a good idea.

This information provides a general overview on depression and may not apply to everyone.