

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION AND ANTIDEPRESSANT MEDICATION

What is depression?

The word “depression” is often used to describe the feelings of sadness which all of us experience at some stage of our lives. It is also a term used to describe a form of mental health problem called clinical depression, which affects a person’s mood over a long time and can include feeling very sad for no clear reason, losing interest in things you usually enjoy, excessive worrying and having problems concentrating and making decisions. For some people clinical depression is often accompanied by a feeling of being suspended or floating, worried, anxious and irritable.

These are called symptoms or signs of depression. Everyone feels these at times. But if you have had these symptoms for more than a few weeks or if they start to interfere with your life then you may have depression and you may need to seek help from your doctor or another healthcare worker.

How is depression treated?

Depression is a condition that can be treated. The treatment for depression may include a combination of:

- medication to help with the symptoms of depression;
- talking to a doctor, psychologist, nurse or health worker (counselling); and
- community supports, friendship and help with everyday things like information; accommodation; finding suitable work; training and education etc.

If your doctor has decided that you need antidepressant medication to treat your depression, this fact sheet will help you to understand your medication, how to use it safely and where to get more information.

What is antidepressant medication?

People with depression often have an imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain. Antidepressant medications are medicines that help reduce the symptoms or signs of depression by helping the brain restore its usual chemical balance.

In Australia there are many different types of antidepressant medication and the companies that make them also give them different names. The right one for you will depend on your age, the symptoms you have and any other medication you may be taking.

How do I get antidepressant medication?

Only a medical doctor (a general practitioner [GP] or psychiatrist) can give you antidepressant medication. Once the doctor works out which medicine is right for you, he/she will put it on a piece of paper (called a prescription or script) which describes which drug you need, what strength it should be, how many you should get and how often you should take it. This information is for you to take to your pharmacist or chemist. When you give the script to your pharmacist, he/she will then give you the medicine.

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When you see the doctor

- As you will need to spend time talking to your doctor, make sure that you schedule a long appointment (called a consultation) as this means he/she will have more time to talk with you. You may also want to bring a friend or family member with you.
- Ask the doctor to provide you with an interpreter. This person should be a professional, not a friend or family member. Some mental health services have interpreter services available. Many do not.
- If you cannot get an interpreter, ask the doctor to use the Telephone Interpreter Service which is available 24 hours, 7 days per week. The phone number for the Telephone Interpreter Service is 131 450.
- Make sure that you give your doctor as much information as possible – particularly if you are taking other medication, including natural or herbal medicines or medicines from the supermarket or pharmacy.
- Tell the doctor about any other health problems you have, if you have any allergies or have had problems with other medicines in the past. Also tell the doctor if you are pregnant or breastfeeding – some medication is not good for babies. Your doctor can tell you which ones are the safest to use.
- Write down the things you need to ask before you see your doctor and take the list with you on your visit. You might like to ask the questions below.

Going to the pharmacist

- Your pharmacist (or chemist) will most likely be in a shop in your local community.
- When you go to the pharmacist, someone will take your prescription and the pharmacist will give you the medication the doctor has ordered. He or she will also tell you how to take the medication, how much to take (the dose), how often to take it and any other important information about taking your medicine.
- There may be people also working in the shop who are not pharmacists, but if you have any questions ask to speak to “the pharmacist”.
- Make sure you have time to get the information you need by visiting your pharmacist during quieter hours if necessary (ask when these are).

How long does antidepressant medication take to work?

Antidepressant medications can often take up to four weeks to work. For some people it can take up to eight weeks before they feel better. Most people find they feel better after taking medication.

Are there any side effects of antidepressant medication?

The antidepressant medication is meant to make you feel better but sometimes it makes you sick in other ways – these are called side effects. Some side effects are not serious but some can be.

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The possible side effects of antidepressant medications include:

- Feeling sick (nausea)
- Headaches
- Broken sleep
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Dizziness and blurred vision
- Weight gain
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Difficulty with sexual arousal or pleasure

It is very important to speak with your doctor or pharmacist if you do suffer from side effects. Your doctor will be able to help you have less side effects – for example he/she may suggest that you take your medicine at certain times of the day or take a lower dose.

When can I stop taking antidepressant medication?

After taking the antidepressant medication for a while you might start to feel good and may no longer have symptoms of depression – BUT you should not stop taking your medicine until you have spoken with your doctor. Stopping antidepressant medicine suddenly could make you feel stressed and sick. If you do want to stop taking your medication, talk with your doctor about how you can work together to make this happen.

How can I take antidepressant medication safely?

There are several things you can do to make sure that you are taking your medication safely:

- Give your doctor as much information as possible
- Store your medication properly – keep your medicine cool and dry and out of reach of children
- Don't share your medicine with others – your doctor has decided this is the best medicine for you, not others, so don't share your medication with anyone else even if their symptoms are similar
- Take the right amount – you will feel better if you take the amount of medicine that your doctor prescribes.

What else can I do to reduce depression?

Antidepressant medications are one important step in getting better, but people often need to do more than just take medicine.

You could also:

- Share your experiences with important people in your life – friends, relatives and trusted people in your community
- Talk with health workers, nurses and trained counsellors
- Be involved in community activities and groups
- Increase your exercise and physical activity as this may also be helpful
- Eat a healthy diet involving cereals, fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and eggs.

Talk to your doctor about the other things you can do to reduce the symptoms of depression.

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Where can I get more information?

For more information speak with your local doctor, pharmacist or health worker.
Ask them to write their contact details in this box:

REMEMBER – before you finish your visit to your doctor or pharmacist make sure you know the answers to the following questions:

What the medicine is for

- Why am I using this medicine?
- When will I start to see changes in my health?

How to use the medicine

- How much should I use?
- What times of the day should I use it?
- What should I do if I forget to take a dose?

When to stop using any of your medicines

- Do I have to finish all of the medicine, or just use it until I feel better, or keep using it for a long time?
- When I start using a new medicine, should I stop using any of my others?

Any special instructions

- Are there any special instructions for using this medicine? For instance, do I take it before or after meals?
- What is the correct way to use it?

Possible side effects

- What side effects do I need to watch for?
- What should I do if I get a side effect?

What to do, and not to do, while using the medicine

- Are there any medicines I should not use at the same time as this medicine?
- Can I drink alcohol when using this medicine?
- Do I need monitoring or testing? How often do I need to have my medicines reviewed?
- How should I store this medicine?

When do I have to return to my doctor?

Is there any other important information I need to remember?

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