



Depression is an illness that affects the mind as well as the body. Antidepressant medications restore the proper balance of chemicals in the brain, so the mind and body can return to normal.

The most common type of medication used to treat depressive illness is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI).

Medications take time to work

Antidepressants can take several weeks to start working. *Therefore, it is important to keep taking your medication until your doctor says to stop, even if you feel better.* Besides, some medications must be stopped gradually to give your body

time to adjust. Also, if you stop too soon, you may be more likely to have the depression return.

In some cases of chronic depression, medication may have to become part of your everyday life to avoid having the symptoms of depression return.

Antidepressant drugs are not addictive. However, as with any medication taken for more than a few days, antidepressants have to be carefully monitored to make sure that you are getting the right dose. Your doctor will want to check the dosage and effectiveness regularly, especially in the first three months of treatment.

Never mix medications of any kind without talking to your doctor or other medical professional. Be sure to tell your dentist or any other medical professional who prescribes a drug that you are taking antidepressants. Some of the safest drugs when taken alone can cause severe and dangerous side effects if mixed with others. Alcohol, including wine, beer, and hard liquor, can reduce the effectiveness of antidepressants and can cause added sedative effects. Therefore, alcohol should be avoided.

Anti-anxiety drugs or sedatives are not antidepressants. Although they are sometimes prescribed along with antidepressants, they should not be taken alone for depressive illness. Decongestants should not be taken with certain antidepressants. Sleeping pills are sometimes prescribed for temporary use with antidepressants.

Be sure to call your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions about any drugs or if you are having problems that you believe are related to the drugs that you are taking.

Antidepressant side effects and how to handle them

Your doctor will consider a number of factors before prescribing antidepressants. These medications, like any other, may cause mild and usually temporary side effects in some people. Unusual side effects (or those that interfere with functioning) should be reported to your doctor or other health care professional.

If your medicine is an SSRI, such as Prozac or Paxil, you may have some of the side effects listed below. Here are ways to deal with them.

- A headache will usually go away on its own.
- Although nausea is common when taking SSRIs, it is usually short-lived. You can also take antidepressants with food to reduce nausea.
- Nervousness and insomnia (not being able to sleep) may occur during the first few weeks. If these conditions don't go away, contact your doctor or other health care professional.
- You may feel anxious the first time after the drug is taken. If the anxiety is bothering you, talk to your doctor.
- Sexual problems may occur. If this is causing problems for you, contact your doctor or other medical professional. There may be a remedy.

Common myths and truths about antidepressant medications

Myth

Medications will cover real feelings of sadness or prevent appropriate feelings.

Truth

Medications won't prevent you from feeling appropriate feelings or sadness. The medications will help prevent the extremes that make it difficult to deal with feelings effectively. Appropriate use of medication may allow you to work more effectively in psychotherapy.

Myth

Antidepressants are habit-forming.

Truth

Antidepressants are not habit-forming. You may need to take them for a long period of time, but long-term use is not harmful or addicting.

Myth

Antidepressants like Prozac cause people to become violent, crazy, or suicidal.

Truth

Antidepressants are effective in treating depression in about 75 percent of the people who take them. Many people who are depressed experience thoughts and feelings of suicide. It is possible that a very small percentage (about 1 to 3 percent) of people who take antidepressants may have more thoughts or feelings of suicide, but the evidence is not clear. Your physician will monitor this closely and needs to know if you experience any feelings of suicide at any time in your treatment. There is no evidence that taking antidepressants makes people violent.

Myth

Antidepressant medication and 12-step programs are incompatible.

Truth

Antidepressant medications are not addictive drugs, and they do not mask your true feelings. Use of a medication is a health decision you make along with your doctor. Nobody else has to know about the treatment.

Myth

The use of antidepressant medications means personal failure or inadequacy.

Truth

Using an antidepressant medication does not mean that you are a failure or inadequate in any way. Depression is an illness, not a personal weakness or something one can just "snap out" of.

Myth

Antidepressants are a short-term solution to solving depression.

Truth

Antidepressants are usually given for at least six to nine months for a first episode of major depression. For some people, medication may be necessary on an ongoing basis.

Myth

Other people will know that you are on antidepressants.

Truth

A person on medication does not "look medicated." People can't tell by looking.

Myth

Side effects are worse than feeling better.

Truth

Most side effects are mild and come and go.

It may take up to six weeks for you to feel the full effect of the medication. However, most people experience positive effects sooner. Many effects are subtle. You'll feel less overwhelmed, more able to cope, more directed, and less depressed.

Remember, feeling better is not a signal to stop taking your antidepressant medications.

If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital. When you have an emergency medical condition, we cover emergency care from Plan providers and non-Plan providers anywhere in the world.

An emergency medical condition is (1) a medical or psychiatric condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or serious impairment or dysfunction of your bodily functions or organs; or (2) when you are in active labor and there isn't enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to you or your unborn child's health and safety.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.