

Stopping antidepressants: be cautious and go slow

This information sheet will help you understand more about stopping antidepressant medicines. The information sheet is not a substitute for talking with your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

It is important that you do not stop taking your antidepressant suddenly. The dose of your antidepressant should be reduced slowly before stopping it completely. Stopping your antidepressant could take as little as four weeks. Many people find that it takes a lot longer.

You should always talk to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist before reducing or stopping your antidepressant.



What are antidepressants?

Antidepressants are medicines prescribed for depression. Antidepressants are also used for other conditions like anxiety, chronic pain, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Antidepressant withdrawal: what is it and what causes it?

Some people experience withdrawal symptoms when they try to reduce or stop taking an antidepressant. This is called antidepressant withdrawal or discontinuation syndrome. Withdrawal symptoms can be physical and/or mental and are different for everyone.

The exact cause is not fully understood.

What are the symptoms of antidepressant withdrawal and how severe can they be?

Withdrawal symptoms can be mild and go away quickly. Sometimes they can be severe and last a long time, even months.

The most common symptoms are listed below. If you have troublesome symptoms speak with your doctor as soon as possible.

- **Stomach problems:** feeling sick (nausea), vomiting, queasiness, stomach cramps, stomach pain, diarrhoea, not feeling hungry (loss of appetite)
- **Sleep changes:** difficulty getting to sleep (insomnia), strange dreams or nightmares, decreased need for sleep, tiredness,
- **Symptoms from the nervous system:** dizziness, light-headedness, loss of coordination, feeling restless and unable to stay still (akathisia)
- **General issues:** tiredness, fatigue, flu-like symptoms, headache, feeling generally unwell
- **Mental changes:** low mood, feeling unable to enjoy things, anxiety, anger, rapid changes in mood, agitation, irritability, difficulty concentrating, suicidal thoughts
- **Sensory changes:** 'electric shock/zap' sensations, numbness, a feeling that things are not real, brain fog, changes to your vision.

If you feel like you did before you started the antidepressant, or you have suicidal thoughts, low mood, or rapid changes in mood, **talk to your doctor or your mental health services immediately.**

Who is affected by antidepressant withdrawal symptoms?

Not everyone who reduces or stops an antidepressant will experience withdrawal symptoms. About a third to half of people who stop taking their antidepressant will experience withdrawal symptoms to some extent (Figure 1)

Figure 1: A third (a) to a half (b) of people will experience at least one withdrawal symptom when stopping their antidepressant.



If you have taken a high dose of antidepressants for a long time you are more likely to have withdrawal symptoms. Some antidepressants are more likely to cause withdrawal symptoms (see Table 1).

Table 1: Risk of withdrawal symptoms with different antidepressants

Highest risk	Moderate risk	Low risk
Amitriptyline	Citalopram	Fluoxetine
Clomipramine	Escitalopram	
Paroxetine	Imipramine	
Venlafaxine	Nortriptyline	
	Mirtazapine	
	Sertraline	

Information on stopping antidepressants

If you are ready to stop taking your antidepressant, speak with your doctor. Together you can make a plan on when and how to reduce and stop taking your antidepressant medicine.

To reduce the risk of withdrawal symptoms, you need to slowly reduce how much you take. This is called 'dose tapering'. Dose tapering can take weeks to months.

It is important to take your medicine regularly during this time. This stops the amount of medicine in your body fluctuating which can increase the risk of withdrawal symptoms.

Dose tapering is not always successful. Some people may need to change medicine before they can stop their antidepressant.

No matter how low you reduce your medicine dose to, you can still get withdrawal symptoms when you stop completely. If this happens, speak with your doctor who can advise you on your next steps.