

# Are You Considering Anti-Depressant Medications for Depression?

## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers about Antidepressants

Perhaps your counselor or psychiatrist has mentioned this option to you, or you've wondered whether an antidepressant medication might be helpful based on what you've "heard" or the experiences of friends or family members.

If you decide to explore the option of medication further, you will want to meet with a physician and, if possible with a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor whose specialty is the diagnosis and treatment of emotional and mental health problems. A psychiatrist is specially trained in the use of medication to treat depression.

### Depression is Treatable

#### 1. What are the signs that I may be depressed and therefore might need medication?

You may have been feeling sad, irritable or depressed most of every day for weeks, if not months. Activities or people you used to enjoy might not seem interesting anymore. You might stop attending class and feel tired all the time. You might find you have increased or decreased appetite, or you might find that you have lost or gained weight. A couple of days of insomnia, sleeping all day, or wanting to "just stay in bed" occasionally happen for us all. But when this happens consistently over a period of weeks it suggests a more serious problem.

If you're depressed, you may have difficulty concentrating or making decisions. Friends may comment that you're extra "sensitive" or crying a lot. When you are this depressed, it is not unusual to feel hopeless and helpless, as if you're "stuck in a dark hole" and can't get out. Other people may notice you no longer seem to care about your responsibilities or your appearance. You may think about death a lot and even consider killing yourself. These are all signs of a serious depression.

#### 2. Is depression a sign of personal "weakness"?

Depression is one of the most common concerns reported by students. It's not a condition that you can will or wish away. People suffering from depression cannot merely expect to "pull themselves together" and get better. Without treatment, symptoms of depression may persist or get worse. With treatment, you may begin to experience significant relief within four to six weeks.

#### 3. Shouldn't I be able to feel better without taking medication? Don't other people get through this without medication?

Eventually, some people will feel better, even without treatment. Unfortunately, if untreated, depression **can** get worse and seriously interfere with your ability to study, work and enjoy relationships. Depression can also be a **life-threatening illness** when there is a risk of suicide. Medication will not "fix" everything, but it may help lighten your mood and help you to function so that you can begin working through other problems.

#### 4. How does an antidepressant work?

Research suggests that depression may be linked to changes in the functioning of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Complex biological changes can produce profound changes in your mood and behavior. Antidepressants are thought to correct some of the chemical imbalances present in a depressive illness.

#### 5. Is there a blood test for depression?

The diagnosis of depression is based on the recognition of certain characteristic signs and symptoms affecting your mood state, thinking patterns and physical well-being. At present, there is no blood test that can confirm or eliminate the diagnosis of depression.

#### 6. How long will I have to take a medication?

You and your treatment professional(s) will meet regularly after medication is prescribed to assess any changes and/or concerns and to evaluate how the medication is working for you. Typically, people take antidepressant medications for eight to twelve months or longer. While it is often tempting to stop taking the medication when you feel better, it is important to continue until you and your doctor agree your depression is treated. Stopping the medication early can result in the return of your original symptoms.

#### 7. Will the depression come back when I stop taking medication?

There is always a chance that your depression may return once a medication is stopped. Continuing antidepressants and/or therapy for the recommended time period minimizes this possibility. Unfortunately, in a small number of cases, depression reoccurs after treatment is complete. Recognizing the signs of a new depressive episode and seeking treatment early are **very** important.

## 8. Is the medication addictive? Will I get "high"?

The currently prescribed medications that are approved for the treatment of depression are **not** considered addictive. Early on in treatment, antidepressants may cause you to feel unusually energized, especially compared to your previous state. As with most prescription medications, there are also potential drug side effects with antidepressants. Feeling "high" or intoxicated suggests an unusual reaction to your medication, an interaction with another medication, complications from drug or alcohol use, or other unwanted side effects. Should you experience any of these problems, **contact your psychiatrist immediately**.

## 9. Will the medication change my personality?

Medication will not change who you are as a person, your unique personal characteristics, or your life circumstances. The goal of antidepressant therapy is to allow you to work toward positive changes in your mood state and thinking patterns. Antidepressant medication assists people in experiencing the full range of human emotions without feeling overwhelmed. Although these positive changes may seem like personality changes, most often they are a sign that you are recovering your ability to react to people and situations in a non-depressed way.

## 10. What might my counselor ask me to do before prescribing medication?

The first step is usually an appointment with a psychiatrist to discuss your depressive symptoms. Your psychiatrist may ask the same questions you have already been asked by another professional. While you may find this repetition frustrating, keep in mind that questions are repeated so that your doctor can gain a thorough understanding of your symptoms, medical history, medication use, and drug or alcohol use.

## 11. How will my doctor choose which medication to prescribe?

There are approximately 20 antidepressants currently available and approved for the treatment of depression. Like shoe sizes, not every medication is the right fit for every individual; a medication that worked well for a friend may not be the best match for you.

The goal of treatment is to effectively eliminate depression with a medication that produces minimal problems or adverse effects. It is important that you ask your doctor about any concerns you might have about a medication or its potential side effects.

## 12. What are the possible side effects of antidepressant medication?

Antidepressants are a relatively safe treatment option. They cause mild, and usually temporary side effects in some people. Most of the time, side effects are mild, manageable and disappear over time. Common side effects include nausea, loose stools or constipation, dizziness, drowsiness, nervousness, sleep changes, dry mouth, headache and blurred vision. Some people experience a change in sexual interest or functioning. While more severe problems are less common, they are possible.

Your doctor or pharmacist will have information sheets that outline a range of potential side effects. Unusual side effects or those that could interfere with your ability to work or study should be reported to your doctor immediately. Most side effects are reversible and gradually disappear after a medication is stopped.

## 13. How long will it be before the medication helps me? How will I know that the medication is working?

All antidepressants take time to work. Don't be discouraged if you don't feel better right away. Therapeutic response typically occurs within two to four weeks after treatment is started, although some people feel better sooner. It is not unusual for your friends and family to notice signs of improvement before you do. When the medication begins to work, you may find yourself increasingly able to accomplish things and enjoy life in a way that is more "normal" for you. Each person is unique in his or her response to medication.

## 14. Can I take other medications along with antidepressants?

An important question! Sometimes when antidepressants are taken in combination with other drugs, the chances of side effects or drug interactions increase. Be sure to tell your doctor about any medications you use, **even** over-the-counter or "natural" vitamins and herbal products.

## 15. Will the medication interfere with my birth control pills?

There is no evidence that antidepressants decrease contraceptive protection. However, like other medications, antidepressants are potentially harmful to the fetus if you are or become pregnant.

## 16. Are there "natural" substances I can use to treat depression?

There has been a great deal of publicity about herbal preparations such as St. John's Wort for the treatment of depression. Unfortunately, in the United States there are currently no adequate studies to prove that this or other herbal remedies are an effective treatment, especially when compared to standard antidepressants for certain forms of clinical depression. Currently it is **not recommended** that traditional antidepressants be **mixed** with herbal antidepressants.

## 17. How much will antidepressant medication cost?

Although the cost of medication may be difficult for some students to budget, **the costs of not treating a depression are also high**. Your ability to function in school, relationships and outside employment may be significantly affected by an untreated episode of depression. Many insurance companies pay a portion of medication costs. You will need to check your individual insurance policy to find out what medication expenses are covered.

#### 18. Why can't I use alcohol when taking medication?

Did you know that alcohol itself is an extremely potent **depressant**? You certainly don't want to feel **more** depressed! Many depressive conditions are associated with the excessive use of alcohol and some drugs. Using drugs or alcohol can increase the risk of dangerous behaviors including suicide **or** cause complicated interactions with your prescribed medication.

#### 19. What if I forget to take my pills on schedule?

This is something you'll want to discuss with your doctor. In most cases, if you miss a dose of your medication, **don't take a double dose next time**. Simply continue with the next scheduled dose and try not to miss again. If you miss several consecutive doses you may experience problems such as headache and nausea. Most importantly, if you often forget to take the medication, your recovery is likely to take longer.

#### 20. How do I tell my family and friends?

Often the people who care about you are already aware of and concerned about the changes in your mood and energy levels. They may be very relieved that you are getting help. Since depression can leave you feeling exhausted or helpless, getting support from others at this time is very important. However, many people have never experienced a serious depression and have trouble fully understanding how disabling it can be. They might not **mean** to hurt you but they **may say or do** things that **do hurt**. It may help to share this information with those you most care about so that they can better understand and help you.

#### 21. If I am taking medication, will I still need counseling?

For many people the combination of medication and psychotherapy is the most effective way to treat depression. While medication can help improve depressive symptoms, it can't change the events, thoughts or behaviors that are problematic or distressing for you. Individual and/or group psychotherapy may be recommended to assist you in improving self-esteem, relationship skills and strategies for managing stressful events. Good nutrition, good quality sleep and exercise are also important elements of your recovery. To feel better as quickly as possible, consider all the recommendations made to you by your counselor and your psychiatrist.