

Tips for stopping antidepressant medicines

This leaflet will help you understand more about stopping antidepressant medicines. It does not replace talking with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about your medicine.

Do not stop taking your antidepressant suddenly. Talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before reducing or stopping your antidepressant medicine.

You will need to reduce the amount of your antidepressant slowly before stopping.

What are antidepressants?

Antidepressants are medicines used to treat depression and other conditions such as 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 their 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?

The most common symptoms are listed below. Talk to your doctor as soon as possible if you are having problems stopping an antidepressant.

- **Stomach problems:** feeling sick, vomiting, queasiness, stomach cramps, stomach pain, diarrhoea, not feeling hungry.
- **Sleep changes:** difficulty getting to sleep, strange dreams or nightmares, decreased need for sleep, tiredness.
- **Nervous system problems:** 'electric shock/zap' sensations, numbness, dizziness, light-headedness, loss of coordination, feeling restless and unable to stay still, changes to your vision.
- **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, a feeling that things are not real, brain fog.

If you feel depressed or anxious, 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?

Between a third and half of people who stop taking their antidepressant will experience withdrawal symptoms.

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

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

Information on stopping antidepressants

If you are ready to stop taking your antidepressant, speak with your doctor so you can make a plan together.

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, and you may need liquid versions of your medicine.

It is important to take your medicine regularly. 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 antidepressant medicine and then taper the dose of the new medicine.

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.

More information

You can find out more in the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflet for your medicine. Search for the CMI on the Medsafe website:

- medsafe.govt.nz/DbSearch/infoSearch

Healthify also has information about antidepressants and lowering the dose or stopping:

- healthify.nz/medicines-a-z/a/antidepressants
- healthify.nz/medicines-a-z/a/antidepressants-lowering-your-dose-or-stopping