



# Age Concern and Help the Aged **Down, but not out factsheet**

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## **Medication for depression in later life** **Author: Dr Robert Baldwin**

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### **Should medication be taken for later life depression?**

Depression can develop at any time. With the right treatment plan you stand a very good chance of getting better, whatever age you are.

There is a range of therapies that can help and what suits you best will depend on the type of depression you have, what your doctor advises and what your own preferences are. Medications and talking therapies (like counselling) are the two most common forms of treatment.

Medication is not always recommended for mild depression but it can be effective for more severe forms of depression (sometimes called 'clinical depression'). In fact, the more severe your depression is, the greater the likelihood of recovery with medication. Sometimes combining medication with talking therapies can also be very effective.

### **How do antidepressants work?**

If you have clinical depression\* the chemicals in your brain that help maintain your good mood (e.g. serotonin) drop to low levels. In one way or another, all antidepressants act by boosting the level of these chemicals.

It can take your brain cells some time to adjust to the increase in these chemicals which is why it usually takes two weeks or so before you feel any benefits from the medication you are taking.

\* You may be diagnosed with clinical depression if you have experienced five or more symptoms of depression on a regular basis for two weeks or more. For a list of symptoms see factsheet: What is depression? by Professor Carolyn Chew-Graham.

### **Can tablets help when there is an understandable reason for my depression?**

Yes. In clinical depression antidepressants work just as well whether or not you have recently experienced difficulty or sadness in your life, such as a bereavement or physical illness. This is because in depression, the brain's chemistry seems to be altered in similar ways whether or not there is an understandable reason for your low mood or no obvious reason at all.

### **Are antidepressants addictive?**

No, antidepressants are not addictive.

You need to be aware though that you should not suddenly stop taking antidepressants because it can cause anxious feelings, poor sleep or odd bodily sensations. Although very unpleasant, these symptoms are not dangerous and they will wear off quickly. It is best to avoid them completely by coming off antidepressants slowly. Before making a decision to stop your medication, or change your dose, you should always speak to your doctor.

### **What type of antidepressant will work for me?**

There are quite a lot of antidepressants on the market but they do differ in the way they tackle particular symptoms of depression. Your doctor will help you choose one which is tailored to your needs. For example, some antidepressants can help increase your energy levels if you are feeling lethargic, whilst others can help with poor sleep.

For treatment of milder depression, you might consider herbal remedies like St John's Wort which you can get over the counter without a prescription. But do first talk to your doctor or pharmacist as St John's Wort can sometimes interfere with other tablets you may be taking. You also need to be sure the preparation you are sold has enough of the active ingredient in it.

### **Are there side-effects?**

All medication can cause side-effects but modern antidepressants are generally very safe and any side-effects tend to be mild. Some side-effects may include nausea, diarrhoea or both, usually straight after you begin taking the medication but these usually only last a few days. You may feel a little restless to begin with as well. Some people report vivid or unpleasant dreams. If side-effects persist, your doctor will recommend another antidepressant or may suggest you come off them altogether. You may have heard about an increased risk of suicide with antidepressants. It is a concern in children and young people but there is no evidence of this happening to older people taking antidepressants.

### **Is it safe to take antidepressants with other medication?**

Newer antidepressants are usually quite safe to take with other medication and your doctor or pharmacist will advise you about this. As with any medication which acts on the brain, care needs to be taken with alcohol which can cause drowsiness with antidepressants. If you think an antidepressant is making you drowsy or in any way slowing your reactions, you should avoid driving.

### **What if some tablets are missed?**

Antidepressants should be taken regularly as prescribed, although an occasional missed tablet should not cause problems. Depression can cause trouble with concentration and difficulty remembering to take the tablets. If this happens, it may help to speak to your pharmacist as most antidepressants need to be taken only once a day and special dispensing aids ('dossett' boxes or blister packs) are available.

### **What happens if I do not get better with tablets?**

The first thing to remember is that antidepressants do not work straight away. There may be improvement after 10 to 14 days but sometimes it takes longer, up to four to six weeks. Provided there is steady improvement, there is no need to be alarmed. Not all symptoms of depression get better at the same rate. For example you may start to sleep better quite soon but find your energy levels are still poor, or it could be the other way around.

If you do not improve as quickly as hoped, symptoms such as worry, poor sleep and reduced motivation may be overcome with a talking treatment alongside your medication. Not everyone will recover with the first antidepressant they receive. If this happens, your doctor may recommend changing to a different antidepressant or may look at increasing the dosage.

Keep up a good level of activity as this too helps to get the best out of the medication.

### **How long should antidepressants be taken for?**

You may want to stop or reduce the dose of your antidepressants once you feel better. However, research shows that there is a better chance of staying well if the antidepressant is continued for at least six to twelve months at the same dose.

Remember that antidepressants are not addictive and can be stopped successfully when the time is right. If you have had several bouts of depression you may be advised to stay on antidepressants in the longer term. Your GP or psychiatrist will discuss this with you.

### **Other sources of help**

#### **Age Concern and Help the Aged**

Many local Age Concerns provide, or can direct you to, a range of support services such as:

- Information and advice
- Day centres and lunch clubs
- Befriending schemes
- Bereavement counselling, depression support, person-centred therapy
- Transport to activities
- Exercise programmes
- A free benefits check
- Insurance services
- Dementia care

For more information, or to find your nearest Age Concern, please contact our free National Information Line on **0800 00 99 66**.

More information about our depression campaign 'Down, but not out' and our free resources and factsheets can be found on our website:

[www.ageconcern.org.uk/downbutnotout](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/downbutnotout)

#### **Factsheets in this series include:**

What is depression? by Professor Carolyn Chew-Graham
The causes and effects of depression in later life by Professor Klaus Ebmeier and Dr Philip Wilkinson
Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) by Dr Philip Wilkinson
Counselling and Psychotherapy by Judith Brech
Interpersonal therapy by Dr Rebecca Mather

Self help for beating depression and staying well by Philippa Cuttell & Lisa Bracher

Thoughts of self harm and suicide by Dr Dan Harwood

### **Depression Alliance**

Provides information and support services to those affected by depression

Telephone: 0845 123 23 20

Email: [information@depressionalliance.org](mailto:information@depressionalliance.org)

Website: [www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

### **Mind**

Provides information and advice on depression and campaigns to promote and protect good mental health for everyone.

Telephone: 020 8519 2122

Email: [contact@mind.org.uk](mailto:contact@mind.org.uk)

Website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

### **Mind Cymru**

Telephone: 02920 395 123

Email: [contactwales@mind.org.uk](mailto:contactwales@mind.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.mind.org.uk>

### **Alzheimer's Society**

Gives support to families by linking them through membership and provides information on Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

Telephone: 020 7423 3500

Email: [info@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:info@alzheimers.org.uk)

Website: [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)

### **Aware (Ireland)**

Assists and supports those suffering from depression and their families in Ireland. A helpline is available as well as support groups, lectures, and current research on depression.

Telephone: 1890 303 302

Email: [wecanhelp@aware.ie](mailto:wecanhelp@aware.ie)

Website: [www.aware.ie/](http://www.aware.ie/)

### **Samaritans**

Provide a confidential 24 hours a day helpline for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide.

Telephone: 1850 60 90 90 (24 hours)

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### **CRUSE - Bereavement Care**

Offers a service of counselling, advice and opportunities for social contact to all bereaved people.

Telephone: 0870 167 1677

Email: [helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk](mailto:helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Website: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

## **Depression UK**

A national mutual support group for people suffering from depression

Email: [info@depressionuk.org](mailto:info@depressionuk.org)

Website: [www.depressionuk.org](http://www.depressionuk.org)

## **Healthtalk Online**

People's accounts of their illnesses and treatment, including older people with depression in the Mental Health Section

Website: [www.healthtalkonline.org/](http://www.healthtalkonline.org/)

## **Royal College of Psychiatrists**

Provides free mental health information and leaflets.

Telephone: 020 7235 2351

Email: [leaflets@rcpsych.ac.uk](mailto:leaflets/rcpsych.ac.uk)

Website: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)