

**STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow**

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## **Anti-depressants**

**What they are and how to get the best out of them**

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# **Anti-depressant medication (ADMs)**

(I will use '**ADMs**' to stand for 'anti-depressants' from now on). Your GP may suggest ADMs as one way to help your depression (and other problems). This handout tells you how to get the best out of them. It divides into ten sections:

- 1. Should I take ADMs?**
- 2. How do ADMs work?**
- 3. Choosing the right ADM for you**
- 4. Different types of ADM**
- 5. Side effects and how to deal with them**
- 6. How long should I use them for?**
- 7. Can I just stop taking them?**
- 8. Common questions about ADMs**
- 9. Other ways to handle depression**
- 10. The main points**

This handout gives you only some brief details about ADMs. Always read the Information Sheet that comes in the ADM packet or talk to your GP or chemist.

## **Should I take ADMs?**

If you feel depressed, you should think about using ADMs. The problem with depression is that it can leave you so flat that you have no get up and go. It can also make you feel so stressed that you can't fight back. ADMs can help you get the balance back in your life.

## **Are they just a crutch?**

What is a crutch? It is something that helps keep you on your feet until you are able to walk again on your own. If you had a broken leg, you would use your crutch. Try to see ADMs as a means to an end - you coping better with your life.

## **Should all people who feel depressed use an ADM?**

NO. It is up to you. But don't close your mind to the idea. If you think ADMs could help you then take them. A range of factors often causes depression so don't think that ADMs on their own will solve the problem. But they can help you over the first few hurdles. ADMs should not be used as a first option for mild/moderate depression. They work best for more marked depression.

## **Attack the depression on two fronts**

There is a page at the end of this handout that will give you advice on good ways to fight depression. Along with the ADMs, these can help get you back on your feet.

## How do ADMs work?

### Getting back the balance

For the brain to work at its best, 'messages' have to pass to the various parts very quickly. When you are depressed, the amount of chemical messengers in the brain drops. Whether depression **causes** the level of these chemicals to drop or whether depression **results** from a drop in these chemicals is not all that clear.

In any case, the aim of ADMs is to get back the balance of the chemical messengers to get the brain working at its best.

### Do they work for everyone?

**NO.** ADMs, used alone, help just over half of those who take them. We do not know why some people do well and others do not. But we do know that many people do not use ADMs in the right way. This handout aims to help you get the best out of them.

### Can I get hooked on ADMs?

**No.** ADMs are **not** habit forming. You will not get addicted to them. There are, however, some concerns about one ADM – Seroxat – as a few people have had problems stopping this.

**How long do they take to work?**

These tablets take a good while to get into your system. You may not feel any change for 2 - 4 weeks. You may find your GP starts you off on a low dose and slowly builds this until you reach the level that works best for you. If you do not feel better after a month or two, your GP might up the dose or try another ADM.

**Do they stop working after a while?**

**No.** Once in your system, they should keep on having an effect. The idea is to take them every day to 'top up' the level of chemical messengers in your brain.

## **Choosing the right ADM for you**

### **How do I know what ADM is best for me?**

Your GP will know about the different ADMS and select the one he/she thinks is best for you. Your GP will take into account:

- whether you have used an ADM before
- whether you can use the ADM along with other medicines you may take
- whether other health problems would affect the way the ADM worked
- the way the depression affects you

Some ADMs work best for depression that makes you feel agitated and tense. These ones will help you slow down to a normal level.

Other ADMS work best when you feel flat and drained of energy. These ones can help give you more energy.

There may be a bit of trial and error here. You may have to switch before you find the one that is best for you.

## Different types of ADM

There are many ADMs to choose from<sup>1</sup>. The two most common groups are:

### Tricyclics (TCAs)

Some of the most common TCAs are:

Amitriptyline  
(Tryptafen)

Clomipramine  
(Anafranil)

Dothiepin  
(Prothiaden)

Imipramine  
(Tofranil)

Lofepramine  
(Gamanil)

Nortriptyline  
(Motival)

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<sup>1</sup> All the advice in this handout is only to do with TCAs and SSRIs. New ADMs are appearing all the time. Your tablet may not appear here.

## SSRIs

Some of the most common SSRIs are:

|                          |                         |                            |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Citalopram<br>(Cipramil) | Fluoxetine<br>(Prozac)  | Fluvoxamine<br>(Faverin)   |
| Sertraline<br>(Lustral)  | Paroxetine<br>(Seroxat) | Escitalopram<br>(Cipralex) |
| Venlafaxine<br>(Efexor)* |                         |                            |

\*This is not a true SSRI but as it works in much the same way, I have included it here.

On the whole, no ADM seems to be better than any other. But you may find that some ADMs suit you better than others.

Some ADMs are taken once a day. Some are taken several times a day.

## **Side effects and how to deal with them**

### **Will I have side effects?**

All tablets can have side effects. ADMS are no different. Side effects are more common in the first two weeks. Most people find that they tail off after that.

**Bear in mind that as the ADMS take 2 - 4 weeks to work, you may feel that you get a bit worse before you get better.**

Try to put up with this. As the side effects differ, we will first look at TCAs and then SSRIs.

## TCAs - Common side-effects

|                               |                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Dry mouth                     | Drowsiness                         |
| Sweating                      | Weight gain                        |
| Constipation / diarrhoea      | Dizziness when standing up quickly |
| Slight problems passing water | Heart or pulse rate speeding up    |
| Blurred vision                | Clumsiness                         |

1 or 2 in 10 people have to change tablets due to these effects. Side effects are more common with higher doses.

You may find that your GP starts you off on a low dose to let your body get used to the ADM and then build the dose up to the level you need. This will help ward off side effects.

## SSRIs – Common side-effects

These ADMs seem to have fewer side effects than TCAs. Common ones are:

|                           |                                  |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Nausea                    | Headaches                        |
| Feeling jittery           | Poorer sleep                     |
| Less able to reach orgasm | Stomach upset / loss of appetite |
| Dizziness                 | Dry mouth                        |

About 1 in 10 people have to change ADMs due to these effects.

**The next page gives you some ideas on how to cope with side effects.**

## Coping with side-effects

**Nausea**

Take ADM with meals or at bedtime

**Poorer sleep**

Take ADM as early in the day as you can

**Sex problems**

Take ADM after having sex

**Dizziness**

Get up slowly from chairs, etc. Avoid very hot baths and showers. Avoid alcohol and cannabis

**Headache**

Take pain killers such as paracetamol

**Dry mouth**

Suck lozenges, drink more water, use sugar-free chewing gum. Cut down on alcohol and caffeine (both increase water loss). Suck ice cubes.

**Drowsiness**

Take ADM at bedtime

**Constipation**

Exercise, add more fibre to your diet and drink more water

Most people do not have a great problem with side effects. For most of those who do, the effects tend to clear up quickly.

If you are having bad side effects, tell your GP or chemist. Try not to just stop the ADMs on your own. Think of whether the side effects on the tablets are worse than how you would feel without any tablets.

## **How long should I use them for?**

You should keep taking the ADMs for ***at least*** 6 months after you feel better. You are twice as likely to stay feeling better if you do this. You should stay at the same dose. This helps keep up the balance of the chemical messengers in your brain.

If you are prone to depression, your GP may suggest you stay on ADMs for a longer time.

## **Can I just stop taking them?**

Most ADMs are not addictive. So there should be few problems stopping them. However, do not stop them all at once as some withdrawal symptoms can appear.

In 2003, the makers of Seroxat (Paroxetine) accepted that some people may become dependent on those tablets. It is very important to wean yourself off them.

You should slowly reduce your dose of any ADM over at least four weeks before stopping. If you have been taking ADMs for years, it is best to reduce over six months before stopping.

## **Common questions about ADMs**

### **Will ADMs change my nature?**

**No.** If they work for you, you may feel you have changed but this will be your real self coming to the surface.

### **Do I only take them when I feel bad?**

**No.** You must take them every day. They must stay in your system. Each tablet keeps your system topped up.

### **What if I forget to take them?**

#### **Try these ideas:**

- get into a routine - take them at the same time(s) each day
- get hold of a tablet box
- leave the box where you will see it
- mark it on a diary

If you forget to take one, don't try to make up the next day by taking more.

### **Should I take more if I have a bad day?**

**No.** It won't do you any good. It is taking them day after day that will help you. Stick to your usual dose each day.

### **What should I do if I run out of ADMs?**

Don't let this happen. You must keep taking them every day to get the most out of them. So think ahead - how long does it take to see your doctor? Make sure you make an appointment before you run out of ADMs.

### **Do ADMs help anxiety?**

They can sometimes help some kinds of anxiety such as panic, obsessions and social fears. However, there are better ways of fighting anxiety. The Primary Care Mental Health Team can help with this. Ask your GP or practice nurse.

### **Are they same as diazepam/Valium?**

**NO.** They are not related in any way.

### **Should I take St John's Wort?**

St John's Wort may help milder depression but ADMs are much better when depression levels are high. You should not use St John's Wort with ADMs as they interfere with the way the ADMs work. St John's Wort can also affect other medicines you take (including the Pill). It can affect you if you have certain illnesses. Talk to your GP or chemist before starting St John's Wort.

## **Can I have a drink with my ADMs?**

If you drink when on ADMs, you will feel twice as drunk as you normally would. If you drink often, this will stop the ADMs from working. It can leave you with a nasty hangover. Once the ADMs are in your system, you might be able to have one drink now and then but you should not drink on a regular basis. Alcohol, after making you feel better for a short while, will make you even more depressed than you were at the start.

## **Do ADMs just deal with symptoms? Do I need to look at the causes?**

ADMs should only be one part of the treatment. If there are problems in your life that keep the depression going, you must tackle them. And if the ADMS give you more get up and go, it will be a bit easier for you to do this. The next page gives you advice on other ways to fight depression.

## **Other ways to handle depression**

### **Keep your life as normal as you can**

Depression makes you retreat from life. Try to keep doing all the things you usually do. Try to get to work. Try to keep up a social life. Try to keep up hobbies, etc. This will help you feel you are fighting back.

### **Give yourself a goal each day**

Work out the things you want to do but find it hard due to the depression. Then work out a goal a day. This could be very basic goals such as:

- get up by 8am, wash, get dressed and go for the paper
- phone my brother and go for a game of pool
- take the kids to the baths
- Hoover the hall

It does not matter whether you think it is a lot or a little. Pat yourself on the back each time you reach your goal.

### **Exercise**

Get 30 minutes of moderate exercise each day – ‘moderate’ means do enough to raise your heart rate but not being so out of puff that you could not talk easily. A brisk walk is good enough. If you can do this most days of the week, you could be well on your way to getting better.

## **Confront your problems**

Is there something feeding your depression? Can you do anything about it? Plan ways to do this. Then do it.

## **Fight your thoughts**

Try to look for other ways to see the world instead of just the way the depression makes you think. Try to think positive.

## The main points

- ADMS can be very helpful if you are depressed
- Most ADMs are not addictive
- You must take the same amount every day
- They will take 2 - 4 weeks to start working
- Side effects may occur in the first few weeks. So you may feel a bit worse before you feel better. Try to put up with this.
- If you are concerned about the side effects, talk to your GP. Try to stay on the ADMs till you see your GP
- Try not to drink with ADMs
- Don't run out of tablets. Make sure you see your GP in good time to get another prescription.
- Stay on the ADMs for at least six months after you feel better
- You should wean yourself off of the ADMs. Don't stop all at once.

## **Tackling other problems**

Many people find that having a problem with depression is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, anxiety, poor sleep, panic, low self-confidence, etc., then STEPS might be able to help.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our web site ([www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)) to find out more ways to get back on top.