

Antidepressant discontinuation syndrome

Patient Information – Specialist Mental Health Service Pharmacy

What is antidepressant discontinuation syndrome?

Depression is a serious and common illness that should be actively treated by all effective methods. Antidepressant medication has a vital role in the treatment of some forms of depression.

You may have heard about antidepressant discontinuation syndrome from a friend or on the news, or perhaps read about it on the internet. If you suddenly stop taking your antidepressant medication, you may feel like you have the flu or a cold. This can include symptoms such as headache, tiredness and sweating. You also might have trouble sleeping, have an upset stomach, have shock-like sensations in your arms, hands and head, feel dizzy, or feel nervous. This is called antidepressant discontinuation syndrome. For some people it can be very unpleasant but there are ways that the risk can be minimised. It is not life threatening and usually goes away within one week. The worst symptoms should resolve in fewer than three days, and often within 24 hours

Which antidepressants can cause this problem?

You are more likely to have a problem if you stop taking some antidepressants, such as paroxetine or venlafaxine. However it is possible that you could get symptoms from stopping any antidepressant medication suddenly. As many as one in five people who stop an antidepressant quickly may experience at least a mild version of these symptoms. It is important to note that for a lot of people, when they stop their antidepressants, this is not a problem.

What can I do if I have antidepressant discontinuation syndrome?

If you stopped your antidepressant without talking to your doctor or if you missed a dose, then you can just start taking your antidepressant again and the symptoms should resolve quickly. If you stopped your antidepressant on purpose, talk to your doctor about what is happening and why you stopped.

How do I keep this from happening again?

Take your medication exactly like your doctor or pharmacist has advised. If you want to stop taking your antidepressant medication, talk to your doctor first. Planning changes in advance tends to make things easier and smoother. Working with your doctor to change or stop taking an antidepressant slowly should reduce the likelihood of antidepressant discontinuation syndrome.

While some medicines can either be stopped or very quickly tapered, most antidepressants need to be slowly decreased. You may be instructed to drop the dose by small amounts each week, or perhaps every two weeks, or even every month. However, if you do develop antidepressant discontinuation symptoms when tapering down the dose, your doctor can increase the dose and then after a little while, you can try the taper again possibly at a slower rate.

More information

For more information about:

- hospital and specialist services, go to www.cdhb.health.nz
- your health and medication, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz