



About antidepressants

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Imagine that: opium as an antidepressant!? Might be nice, some would say, but just think about the side

effects! In fact, until the “accidental” discovery of the first antidepressant drug in the 1950s, opium and institutionalisation were two of the choices for treating depression. Today, fortunately, there are other options.

While medication can be an important part of treating depression and anxiety disorders, studies have shown that combining them with therapy provides the best chance of treatment.

Antidepressants work on chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters, two main ones being serotonin and norepinephrine. Brain cells use these compounds to communicate; it is believed that inadequate levels are partly to blame for depression. Antidepressant drugs affect this underlying imbalance of neurotransmitters.

The first antidepressant drug came about during the 1950s as physicians began to notice the side effects of a popular drug to treat the symptoms of tuberculosis. It seems that people were “happier” when taking it.

The first class of antidepressants were monoamine oxidase inhibitors, or MAOIs. Unfortunately, the side effects could kill you! MAOIs came with strict dietary restrictions as consuming the wrong food or drink could cause a life-threatening jump in blood pressure.

Also in the 1950s came a second class of antidepressants: TCAs, or tricyclic antidepressants. These came with none of the strict dietary warnings and were the main choice during the 1960s to 80s. Still, they do have side effects: potential heart problems; are often sedating; can affect coordination; may have weight gain; and could harm self-esteem are the main side effects.

Then came Prozac, the first of the SSRIs, or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, in the late 1980s.

SSRIs were an important breakthrough as they have none of the dietary restrictions, no sedation, unlikely to cause weight gain, and are safer for the heart. Of course, there are side effects—but you knew that.

SSRIs are safer than earlier chemical choices, but no drug is without cautions. The side effects of this class of drug includes headache, insomnia, fatigue, dry mouth, sexual dysfunction and upset stomach.

One important thing to know about any class of antidepressants is that there is no single wonder drug that will “fix” depression in all people all the time.

Depression itself is a complex disease with many causes. If one drug fails, your doctor will choose a second, or a combination to deal with your unique situation.

For some people, St John’s Wort is an option. This natural remedy has been shown to work in some cases to reduce mild depression. Of course, it also has side effects—once again, we knew that! St John’s Wort may cause blood thinning drugs and birth control pills to function poorly. More importantly, please do not get your medical advice from a retail clerk. Like any other drug, discuss this option with your physician and your pharmacist, each of whom can direct you to the choice for your individual situation.

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