

Tricyclic Antidepressants

Tricyclic antidepressants are used to treat depression and other conditions. They take up to four weeks to work fully. Treatment usually lasts six months or more. Side effects may occur, but are often minor and may ease off. At the end of course of treatment, you should gradually reduce the dose before stopping completely.

Tricyclic antidepressants are commonly used to treat depression. They are also used to treat other conditions such as migraine, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, recurrent headaches, and some forms of pain. 'Tricyclic' refers to the chemical structure of the drug.

How do antidepressants work?

Antidepressants alter the balance of some of the chemicals in the brain (neurotransmitters). These are thought to play some part in causing depression and other conditions.

Antidepressants and depression

Sometimes a life problem such as bereavement, redundancy, illness, etc, may cause depression. Sometimes there is no apparent cause for a depression. However, antidepressants treat the symptoms of depression whatever the cause.

Symptoms of depression include: low mood, feelings of sadness, sleep problems, poor appetite, irritability, poor concentration, decreased sex drive, loss of energy, guilt feelings, headaches, aches, pains, and palpitations. If symptoms are eased, you not only feel better, but you may also be able to cope better with any problems or difficult circumstances.

How effective are tricyclic antidepressants?

They work well in about 7 in 10 people with depression. However, they do not make sad people happy. The word depressed is often used when people really mean 'sad', 'fed-up', or 'unhappy'. Depression is different and has persistent symptoms.

Their success in treating the other conditions listed above (migraine etc) varies.

Are there different types of tricyclic antidepressants?

Yes, there are a several different types and brands. A doctor makes a judgment as to which one would best suit. Things such as your age, other medicines that you may take, other medical problems, possible side effects, and previous use of antidepressants are usually taken into account. There is no 'best buy' that suits everyone. It is sometimes necessary to change the dose, or change the preparation if the initial one does not suit. Also, if tricyclic antidepressants do not help then another type of antidepressant may be advised.

Are antidepressants addictive?

No. They are not tranquillizers. At the end of a course of treatment it is usual to reduce the dose gradually over a 4-week period before finally stopping. This is because some people develop withdrawal symptoms if they are stopped abruptly.

What about side effects?

The most common side effects are a dry mouth, constipation, sweating, slight hesitancy in passing urine, slight blurring of vision, and slight drowsiness. These often ease after a week or so as the body becomes used to the medicine. It is worth keeping on with treatment if side effects are mild at first. Frequent drinks will help a dry mouth. The leaflet that comes in the medicine packet gives a full list of possible side effects. Tell your doctor if a side effect persists or is troublesome. A switch to a different medicine may then suit you better.

How quickly do tricyclic antidepressants work?

They take 2-4 weeks to build up their effect and work fully. Some people stop treatment after a week or so thinking it is not helping. It is best to wait for 3 to 4 weeks before deciding if treatment is helping or not. If poor sleep is a symptom of the depression, it is often helped first, within a week or so.

If you find that the treatment is helpful after 3-4 weeks, it is usual to continue. A normal course of antidepressants lasts up to 6 months or more after symptoms have eased. If you stop the medicine too soon, your symptoms may rapidly return. Some people with recurrent depression need longer courses of treatment.

It is best not to stop treatment without consulting a doctor. The dose is usually gradually reduced before stopping completely at the end of a course of treatment.