

# S.S.R.I. ANTIDEPRESSANTS

## **Why have I been prescribed an SSRI?**

SSRIs are a group of medicines used to treat depression. Depression is a common condition. It is different from the normal “ups and downs” of everyday life. People with depression may feel sad most of the time and cannot see an end to their sadness. Tiredness and poor sleep are very common, and so are changes in appetite. Many people also find that they simply cannot enjoy any of life’s pleasures.

Depression can be treated in many ways. Antidepressants are often used because they are effective for most people. Other “talking” therapies are also effective in depression. Antidepressants can generally be relied upon to relieve the symptoms of depression in most people. The SSRIs can also be helpful in treating other conditions, such as anxiety, eating disorders, panic, obsessive-compulsive disorder and social phobia.

## **What exactly are SSRIs?**

The SSRIs are antidepressants. They are not tranquillisers or sleeping tablets. SSRI stands for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. This just means that these drugs only affect one chemical (called serotonin) in the brain. Examples of SSRIs include citalopram (*‘Cipramil’*), fluoxetine (*‘Prozac’*), fluvoxamine (*‘Faverin’*), paroxetine (*‘Seroxat’*) and sertraline (*‘Lustral’*).

## **Are the SSRIs safe to use?**

It is usually safe to have SSRIs regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but they don’t suit everyone. Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- a) if you have epilepsy or diabetes, or suffer from heart, liver or kidney trouble;
- b) if you are taking any other medication. This includes medicine from your pharmacist, such as theophylline for asthma or St. John’s wort;
- c) if you are pregnant, breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant.

## **How should I take my SSRI?**

Look at the label on your medicine; it should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. If you have any questions, speak to your doctor or pharmacist. Most medicines are now dispensed with an information leaflet for you to read. SSRIs are generally not sedative. In fact they can be rather stimulating and are therefore best taken in the morning. However, other people may find that they make them feel slightly drowsy. If this is the case, it may be better taking it at night.

## **What should I do if I miss a dose?**

Never change your dose without checking with your doctor. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within a few hours of the usual time.

## **Are SSRIs addictive?**

SSRIs are not addictive, but need to be treated with respect. Some people do get some “discontinuation” effects if they stop their SSRIs suddenly. These effects include anxiety, dizziness, feeling sick and not being able to sleep. Some people feel confused and “out of sorts”. Others describe “electric shock” like feelings in their body. These symptoms are less severe if you come off SSRIs slowly. It is best to discuss this with your pharmacist, doctor or nurse. Some people can get these symptoms just by missing one or two doses of their SSRI, although this is uncommon.

## **What will happen to me when I start my SSRI?**

All antidepressants work slowly. People tend to feel better over a period of weeks rather than days. Different symptoms may get better at different times. Most people find that they feel noticeably better after about two or three weeks. However, the full effect of antidepressants is usually felt only after about four to six weeks. It is very important to continue to take antidepressants so that the full effects can be felt. Speak to your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you have any questions about this.

Unfortunately, you might get some side effects before your mood gets any better. Most of these should go away after a few weeks. Look at the table over the page. It tells you what to do if you get any side effects. Not everyone will get the side effects shown. There are many other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

Side effect	What is it?	What should I do if it happens to me?
<b>COMMON</b>		
ANXIETY OR RESTLESSNESS	Being more on edge.	This should wear off fairly quickly. Discuss this with your doctor. If it persists, your doctor may give you something to help.
DIARRHOEA	The "runs", or loose stools	This should wear off fairly quickly. If it becomes a problem, contact your pharmacist or doctor.
INSOMNIA	Not being able to get to sleep at night.	Discuss this with your doctor. He or she may change the time of your dose.
LOSS OF APPETITE	Not feeling hungry. You may lose weight.	If this is a problem, contact your doctor or pharmacist for advice.
NAUSEA and VOMITING	Feeling sick or being sick.	This should wear off fairly quickly. Taking each dose with or after food may help. If it is bad, contact your doctor.
<b>FAIRLY COMMON</b>		
SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION	Lack of libido or no interest in sex. Inability to maintain an erection or have an orgasm.	Discuss this with your doctor when you next meet.
<b>UNCOMMON</b>		
DIZZINESS	Feeling light-headed and faint.	Don't stand up too quickly. Try and lie down when you feel it coming on. Don't drive.
DROWSINESS	Feeling sleepy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your SSRI at a different time of the day.
HEADACHE	When your head is pounding and painful.	It should be safe to take aspirin or paracetamol.
<b>RARE</b>		
DRY MOUTH	Not much saliva or spit.	Sugar-free boiled sweets, chewing gum or eating citrus fruits usually helps. If not, your doctor can give you a mouth spray. A change in medicine or dose may be possible.
RASHES and PRURITUS	Rashes anywhere on the skin. These may be itchy.	Stop taking the SSRI and contact your doctor as soon as you can.
SIADH	Low sodium levels in the blood. Not much urine is passed.	This can be dangerous. See your doctor soon.
TREMOR	Feeling shaky. Your muscles may feel stiff.	Your doctor may be able to give you something for it, or change your medication to one that doesn't cause this.

### What about alcohol?

It is officially recommended that people taking SSRIs should not drink alcohol. This is because both SSRIs and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken at the same time, severe drowsiness may result. This can lead to falls or accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol often makes depression worse. Excessive drinking is especially likely to do this. Once people are used to taking medication, they can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm. Avoid alcohol altogether for the first one or two months. After this, if you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If this doesn't make you feel drowsy, then it is probably OK to drink small amounts. It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

Don't stop taking your medication because you fancy a drink at the weekend. If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Never drink any alcohol and drive while on SSRIs. Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor or pharmacist.

### When I feel better, can I stop taking them?

No. If you stop taking SSRIs, your original symptoms may return. To reduce your chances of becoming depressed again, you may need to take your antidepressant for at least 6 months after you feel better, and sometimes longer. This is not thought to be harmful. You should decide with your doctor when you can come off it.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may find other books or leaflets also useful. If you have access to the internet you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful, as internet based information is not always accurate.

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