

## Where To Start When Thinking Of Weaning Off Antidepressants?

Circumstances may lead you to considering weaning off your antidepressants (e.g. your mood has stabilised/ difficulties in life have become more manageable/ other treatments such as talking therapies have helped).

It is important not to stop antidepressants without first consulting your GP/mental health team/practice pharmacist.

Usually anti-depressants are continued over at least 6 months of significant improvement before consideration is given to weaning down gradually. In those with more severe depression or who have had recurrent episodes of depression, antidepressants are often prescribed for longer durations and may need to be continued as ongoing maintenance treatment.

If you are thinking of gradually coming off your anti-depressants it is therefore essential beforehand to arrange a discussion with a member of the health care team.

**In these discussions, it may be worth considering the following questions.**

If you did want to stop what fears would you have?

What comments have you heard regarding weaning off anti-depressants?

How do you think they help you?

What makes you want to stop?

Which physical symptoms would you be concerned about triggering should you stop?

Which mental health issues would you fear on stopping?

What do you find you have been doing which keeps you mentally healthy, apart from taking the medication?

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It's ok to have fearful / anxious thoughts when stopping treatment which you have been on for a long time. This is in fact very common.

It may be worth accepting that some underlying anxious thoughts are more likely to surface whilst the medication comes out of your system.

Whatever the anxious thoughts are, it's important to pause and consider them rather than automatically believe that they are true.

An increase in anxiety symptoms is recognised as part of the effects of stopping treatment. These are known as **discontinuation symptoms** and can, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, occur in up to 33% of patients stopping antidepressants. Guidelines in England published by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE Guidelines) state that these are often mild though this is variable, hence the need to involve your appropriate health professional if you are thinking of stopping medication.

An important question then, if you feel unwell on weaning down anti-depressants is...

**Am I having a relapse or are these discontinuation symptoms which I should try and cope with for a few days until they settle down?**

### **More About Discontinuation Symptoms**

Having discontinuation symptoms does not mean that your mood problems are returning.

As already mentioned the Royal College of Psychiatrists website states that discontinuation symptoms have been shown to occur in up to 33% of patients. These symptoms include anxiety, dizziness, “electric shock” sensations and stomach upsets. As mood disorders can have similar symptoms, it’s easy to interpret these discontinuation symptoms as a relapse of mental health problems. Here's how to distinguish discontinuation symptoms from relapse:

- Discontinuation symptoms emerge within days to weeks of stopping the medication or lowering the dose, whereas relapse symptoms develop later and more gradually.
- Discontinuation symptoms resolve quickly on restarting the medication

Patients often state that “I know I still need the tablets because I feel unwell if I miss a few days but am then better as soon as I restart them”

This improvement is unlikely to be linked to mood symptoms improving... anti-depressants have a gradual, slow effect on mood, so feeling quickly better when restarting them after a few days is more likely to be due to the halting of the discontinuation symptoms

- Discontinuation symptoms resolve more quickly as the body readjusts, while a recurrence of depression continues over several weeks and may get worse. If symptoms last more than 4-6 weeks and are worsening, it's worth considering whether you're having a relapse of depression.

### **How quickly to reduce?**

Before starting to reduce your dose it is advisable to discuss this directly with your GP or pharmacist. Generally, the advice is to gradually reduce the dose over a 4 week period (NICE Guidelines).

A longer period of gradual reduction may however be required with those drugs which are broken down and leave the body more rapidly (e.g. venlafaxine and paroxetine).

### **How do I manage these temporary anxiety symptoms which may be part of discontinuing my anti-depressant?**

- when reducing medication, choose a fairly settled time, when you have no other major stressors to contend with. This will allow you to focus on managing the temporary discontinuation symptoms.
- look after yourself well in terms of eating and resting enough.
- plan some activity which you find relaxing and enjoyable.
- seek support and reassurance from family and friends if this is available.
- visit the website <http://www.stepsforstress.org> for advice and resources for coping with stress.