

Antidepressants – How to Switch or Stop

Recently, an adverse drug reaction occurred within the CDHB involving a patient who experienced symptoms from paroxetine withdrawal. The dose was reduced from 30mg daily to 10mg daily for 3 days, and then stopped. The patient developed anxiety that was severe enough to require diazepam. This bulletin serves as a reminder on how to switch or stop common antidepressants.

Mechanism of action

Most antidepressants act by increasing concentrations of centrally-acting amines, mainly noradrenaline (NA) and serotonin (5-HT), in the synaptic cleft. This results in homeostatic adjustment of receptors to the increased concentrations.

- **Tricyclic Antidepressants (TCAs)** e.g. amitriptyline TCAs inhibit the reuptake of NA and 5-HT, as well as antagonising cholinergic, histaminic and alpha (α)-1 receptors.
- **Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)** e.g. citalopram, fluoxetine, paroxetine SSRIs increase 5-HT concentrations in the synaptic cleft by inhibiting reuptake. They are less anticholinergic, sedating and cardiotoxic than TCAs.
- **Serotonin–Noradrenaline Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs)** e.g. venlafaxine SNRIs inhibit the reuptake of both 5-HT and NA in the synaptic cleft, similar to TCAs. However, SNRIs have minimal sedative or anticholinergic activity.
- **Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors (MAOIs)** e.g. moclobemide (reversible inhibitor); phenelzine, tranylcypromine (irreversible inhibitors) MAOIs increase intracellular NA concentrations by inhibiting MAO, the enzyme responsible for degradation of NA
- **Others** e.g. mirtazapine Mirtazapine increases NA and 5-HT release in the synaptic cleft by blocking pre-synaptic receptors responsible for feedback inhibition of this release.

Stopping antidepressants

All antidepressants have the potential to cause withdrawal symptoms. When taken for > 6 weeks, doses should generally be tapered, unless a serious adverse reaction has occurred. A reduction of 25% per week may be used as a general guide, although drugs with long half-lives (e.g. fluoxetine) can often be withdrawn more quickly as the long half-life buffers the withdrawal effects.

Withdrawal symptoms may include flu-like symptoms (chills, myalgia, sweating, headache, nausea), insomnia, excessive dreaming and irritability. Alleviation of withdrawal symptoms can be achieved by returning to the previous dose, or by re-instituting the drug at the previous or lower dose, and withdrawing more slowly.

Switching antidepressants (see table below)

Cross-tapering is generally preferred, where the dose of the existing drug is slowly reduced while the new drug is introduced cautiously at a low dose. However, this may not always be necessary, or recommended. Abrupt withdrawal should usually be avoided.

Potential dangers of co-administering two antidepressants include pharmacodynamic interactions (e.g. serotonin syndrome, hypotension, sedation) and pharmacokinetic interactions (e.g. enzyme inhibition by SSRIs) and these should be taken into consideration.

A Guide to Switching Common Antidepressants^(a)

Switching: From \ To	TCA	SSRI	SNRI or mirtazapine	MAOI (reversible)	MAOI (irreversible)
TCA	No washout	Ideally washout 5 half-lives of TCA	No washout – taper ^d	Washout 5 half-lives of TCA	Washout 5 half-lives of TCA
SSRI	Ideally washout 5 half-lives of SSRI. (Caution: fluoxetine ^b)	No washout – taper over 2-5 days (longer if high-dose fluoxetine) then start new SSRI ^c	No washout – taper ^c (Caution: fluoxetine has long half-life ^b)	Washout 5 half-lives of SSRI. (Caution: fluoxetine)	DON'T COMBINE. Washout 5 half-lives of SSRI. (Caution: fluoxetine)
SNRI or mirtazapine	No washout – taper ^b	No washout – taper ^{b, c}	No washout – taper ^{b, c, d}	CAUTION. Washout 5 half-lives.	DON'T COMBINE. Washout 5 half-lives.
MAOI (reversible)	CAUTION. Washout 1-2 days.	CAUTION. Washout 1-2 days.	CAUTION. Washout 1-2 days.	-	Stop & start new drug next day at a low dose
MAOI (irreversible)	CAUTION. Washout 10 days.	DON'T COMBINE. Washout 10 days.	DON'T COMBINE. Washout at least 14 days for SNRI and 10 days for mirtazapine ^c .	Washout 7 days	DON'T COMBINE. Washout 10-14 days.

(a) More rapid switching may often be used in in-patients (except for reversible or irreversible MAOIs) with monitoring of symptoms.

(b) Taper first drug over 3 - 7 days prior to starting second antidepressant; consider starting second drug at reduced dose.

(c) Monitor for serotonergic side effects (e.g. sweating, nausea, hypertension, tachycardia, tachypnoea, diarrhoea, confusion, agitation, tremor, muscular rigidity).

(d) Monitor for noradrenergic side effects (e.g. hypertension, tachycardia, tremor, sweating, insomnia)