

Medicines Management & Pharmacy Services (MMPS)

Discontinuation and swapping of antidepressants

Discontinuation

Discontinuation of antidepressants is associated with a number of symptoms, especially if the drug is stopped abruptly. Onset of symptoms is usually within five days of stopping the drug and the risk is greater if the drug has a short half-life. The risk is also increased in patients, who have been taking antidepressants for 8 weeks or longer.

Antidepressant discontinuation symptoms are commonly seen in neonates born to women, who have taken antidepressants during pregnancy.

Symptoms can usually be avoided if antidepressants are discontinued gradually with decreasing doses over at least 4 weeks. Drugs, with a long half-life, such as fluoxetine, can be stopped more abruptly.

Antidepressant	Drugs most commonly associated with discontinuation symptoms	Common symptoms	Symptoms occasionally seen
MAOIs	All	Agitation, movement disorders, insomnia and cognitive impairment	Hallucinations and paranoid delusions
Tricyclic antidepressants	Amitriptyline Imipramine	Flu-like symptoms and insomnia	Movement disorders, mania and cardiac arrhythmia
SSRIs and SNRIs	Paroxetine Venlafaxine	Flu-like symptoms, dizziness, insomnia and irritability	Movement disorders and problems with concentration and memory
Mirtazapine		Anxiety, insomnia and nausea	

Swapping

When changing from one antidepressant to another abrupt withdrawal should usually be avoided.

Cross-tapering, in which the dose of the drug being withdrawn is slowly reduced whilst the new drug is slowly introduced, is the preferred method.

The speed of cross-tapering is often dependent on patient tolerability.

Cross-tapering is contra-indicated with some groups of antidepressants eg MAOIs.

Further information on swapping antidepressants is available at: [Switching between monoamine oxidase inhibitors and SSRI, tricyclic or related antidepressants - NeLM](#)

Specialist advice is available from LYPFT pharmacy information line:

0113 3056319 (9am – 5pm, Monday - Friday)

or email: pharmacyleedspft.lypft@nhs.net

References:

- (1) Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines; 11th edition; 2012
- (2) BNF 64; September 2012

For further information: www.choiceandmedication.org/leedsandyorkpft

Provenance

Date Produced: March 2013
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Valid until: March 2016
Quality Assurance Check by: CISSG

Review Date:

Produced by Pharmacy Department, LYPFT

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This information has been prepared by Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust Medicines Management and Pharmacy Services