

Distinguishing antidepressant withdrawal symptoms from relapse

Many people experience withdrawal symptoms when they attempt to stop antidepressants. People are more likely to experience withdrawal symptoms if they have been taking antidepressants for a long time (longer than 1-year), at higher doses, and/or they are taking an antidepressant that has higher risk for withdrawal symptoms such as venlafaxine, desvenlafaxine, or paroxetine.

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms are common and can be severe and long-lasting.

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms	
Emotional	anxiety/nervousness, worsened mood, irritability, bouts of crying, mood swings, anger outbursts, feelings of panic
Physical	dizziness/light-headedness, fatigue/tiredness, sensation of spinning/vertigo, insomnia, agitation, feeling of inner restlessness, brain zaps or electric shock sensations, headache, rapid heartbeat, nausea, diarrhoea, muscle cramps, unsteady gait, tinnitus
Cognitive	brain fog, increased sensitivity to light or sound, memory problems, vivid dreams

While common, withdrawal symptoms are often mistaken for relapse or ongoing need for antidepressant therapy leading to reinstating or switching and continuing antidepressants, sometimes long-term. The confusion is easy to understand since the emotional withdrawal symptoms are common to both withdrawal and relapse.

Yet it is possible to distinguish withdrawal symptoms from relapse by paying attention to:

- (1) Timing of onset of symptoms after decreasing or stopping antidepressants
- (2) Time to relief of symptoms on restarting antidepressants
- (3) Distinguishing symptoms, that is symptoms that were never part of the original condition for which antidepressants were started, for example dizziness or 'brain zaps'.

	Withdrawal symptoms	Relapse
Time of onset after stopping or decreasing antidepressants	Start soon after decreasing or stopping antidepressants, usually a few days. But can be delayed weeks or even months later.	Relapse of anxiety or depressive symptoms would generally be expected to take longer.
Time to relief of symptoms after restarting antidepressants	Prompt relief on re-starting antidepressants, usually a few days.	Relief of symptoms would generally be expected to take longer. Antidepressants generally take weeks or longer to treat anxiety or depression.
Presence of distinguishing symptoms	Distinguishing symptoms maybe present: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dizziness, light-headedness, vertigo • Headaches or brain fog • 'Brain zaps' or electric shock sensations • Increased sensitivity to light and/or sound • Nausea, sweating, tremors • Depersonalization or unreal feeling • Vivid dreams • Muscle aches or cramps • Agitation, akathisia 	Physical symptoms, such as dizziness or vertigo, are not part of relapse of original anxiety or depressive condition.

*Maintain a high index of suspicion. A good rule of thumb is that 'the symptoms are withdrawal symptoms until proven otherwise'; if new symptoms appear in someone who has decreased or stopped antidepressants then these symptoms are likely to be withdrawal symptoms. Remember that it is possible to minimise withdrawal symptoms, once recognised, by slow hyperbolic tapering of antidepressant dose.

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Ethical approval: The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (2022/HE001667). Funding: Commonwealth Department of Health, Medical Research Future Fund, Clinician Researchers Applied Research in Health - MRFAR000079. National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2021 Partnership Projects PRC3 - 2015744.

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