

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms

Is it withdrawal symptoms that I am experiencing, or relapse?

If you have reduced or stopped antidepressants and you are feeling anxious, irritable, tearful, dizzy or off-balance, then it is likely that you are experiencing withdrawal symptoms.

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms are common.

Withdrawal symptoms are often mistaken for relapse or ongoing need for medication. The confusion is easy to understand as some symptoms, such as anxiety, irritability or tearfulness, could be either.

Withdrawal symptoms occur because the body and brain adapt to antidepressant medication by growing more cells and stronger synapses to counteract the antidepressant effect of blocking the 5-HT (serotonin) transporter receptors. When antidepressants are stopped, there is a rebound increase in 5-HT transmission which is experienced as withdrawal symptoms. This rebound increase in neural activity is similar to that seen in other drug withdrawal states.

When antidepressants are stopped, the body and brain must re-adapt. This takes time, which is why you should reduce your dose slowly. Antidepressants should never be stopped suddenly.

Use this Aid to help you determine whether you are experiencing withdrawal or relapse.

1. Comparing symptoms of withdrawal and relapse

Withdrawal symptoms	Relapse
What are the symptoms?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety/nervousness, worsened mood, irritability, bouts of crying, mood swings, anger outbursts, feelings of panic 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 Brain fog, increased sensitivity to light or sound, memory problems, vivid dreams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety/nervousness, worsened mood, irritability, bouts of crying, mood swings, anger outbursts, feelings of panic Insomnia, trouble falling or staying asleep, being fidgety or restless, feeling tired or having little energy Trouble concentrating
How soon do symptoms start after reducing or stopping antidepressants?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start soon, usually within a few days. Can be delayed weeks or even months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symptoms of depression or anxiety relapse would generally be expected to take longer.
How long for symptoms to resolve after re-starting antidepressants?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prompt relief, usually within a few days. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relief generally expected to take longer, weeks or months.



For supporting evidence and further information please visit www.releasetoolkit.com.au

2. Distinguishing symptoms: To help distinguish withdrawal from relapse

Distinguishing symptoms are different to the symptoms you were experiencing prior to starting antidepressants.

Withdrawal			Relapse	
4	3	2	1	0
Dizziness, light-headedness, vertigo				
Brain zaps or electric shock sensations				
Increased sensitivity to light or sound				
Unreal feeling, unsteady gait				
Agitation, feeling of inner restlessness				
Nausea, diarrhoea, rapid heartbeat				
Vivid dreams				
Headache, brain fog				
Muscle cramps or aches				

Rate the above symptoms 0-4 and discuss your answers with your doctor and/or family and friends.

3. FAQs

How long do withdrawal symptoms last?

Usually, withdrawal symptoms gradually subside over weeks, although sometimes it can take longer even months or years. It takes time for the body and brain to adapt to being without antidepressants.

How can I minimise withdrawal symptoms?

The best way is by only gradually reducing your dose to stop. See the [RELEASE hyperbolic tapering plans](#).

What increases the risk of withdrawal symptoms?

The risk of withdrawal symptoms is higher in people who have been taking antidepressants for a long time or at higher doses, or taking high risk antidepressants such as venlafaxine, desvenlafaxine, or paroxetine.

Severe and/or long-lasting withdrawal symptoms

People experiencing severe or long-lasting withdrawal symptoms often need to reinstate antidepressants. Future attempts to wean off antidepressants will need to be very slow (e.g. 5% reductions).

Antidepressants do NOT work by correcting a chemical imbalance in the brain. The 'serotonin deficiency' theory has no factual basis.