

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms - overview

Many people experience withdrawal symptoms when they attempt to decrease or stop taking antidepressant medication.

What are the symptoms of antidepressant withdrawal?

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms include emotional, physical and cognitive symptoms.

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

How can I tell if it is withdrawal or relapse?

Emotional withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety and irritability, are readily mistaken for 'relapse', resulting in people reinstating or switching and continuing antidepressants, sometimes long-term (longer than the 6-12 months recommended in clinical guidelines). This confusion is easy to understand since the emotional symptoms are common to both withdrawal and relapse.

However, it is possible to distinguish withdrawal from relapse by noting the presence of physical or unusual symptoms. The distinguishing physical symptoms were never part of the original condition for which antidepressants were started, and include dizziness or light-headedness, 'brain zaps' or electric shock sensations; increased sensitivity to light and/or sound; an unreal feeling or sensation; nausea; tremors; vivid dreams; and akathisia or agitation and severe restlessness.

Maintain a high index of suspicion - a good rule of thumb is that if new symptoms appear when you decrease or stop taking antidepressant medication, then *'the symptoms are withdrawal until proven otherwise'*.

Why do withdrawal symptoms occur?

Research shows that the brain adapts to being exposed to antidepressant medication and then has a rebound reaction when the antidepressant medication is stopped.

Withdrawal symptoms are thus the result of the brain's physical adaptation to antidepressant medication. Antidepressant medication such as SSRIs target the 5-HT transporter in the brain. The brain adapts to antidepressant medication, and the 5-HT blockade, by growing more cells and stronger synapses. Then, when the antidepressant is stopped, there is a rebound increase in 5-HT transmission. The increase in 5-HT transmission is experienced as withdrawal symptoms (e.g., anxiety, insomnia, dizziness etc).

The rebound increase in neural activity seen with antidepressant withdrawal is similar to that seen in other drug withdrawal states such as with opioids, benzodiazepines and alcohol. Withdrawal symptoms are the result of physical adaptation to medication.

How long do withdrawal symptoms last?

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms gradually subside over weeks, but sometimes this can take longer, even months or years. The time it takes for withdrawal symptoms to subside is the time it takes for the brain and body to adapt to being without the drug (not the half-life of the drug).

Withdrawal symptoms are often readily relieved on re-starting the antidepressant, usually within a day or two.

When do withdrawal symptoms start?

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms usually start within a day or two of decreasing antidepressant dose or stopping antidepressants. However, sometimes the onset of withdrawal symptoms can be delayed, even for a few weeks or months.

What increases the risk of withdrawal symptoms?

The risk of withdrawal symptoms increases with increasing duration of therapy. People who have been taking antidepressants for longer (many months or years) or at higher doses are at higher risk of withdrawal symptoms.

The risk of withdrawal is higher with some antidepressants than others. Venlafaxine, desvenlafaxine, and paroxetine have especially high risk of inducing withdrawal symptoms.

How can I minimise withdrawal symptoms?

The best way to minimise withdrawal symptoms when attempting to stop taking antidepressants is by slow hyperbolic tapering of drug dose.

Severe and/or protracted antidepressant withdrawal symptoms

Antidepressant withdrawal symptoms can sometimes be severe and long-lasting. People experiencing this often need to reinstate their antidepressant and, in attempting to wean off antidepressants, to do so very slowly, sometimes over years, for example 5% or less decrease in drug dose every few weeks.

Not everyone will experience protracted or lingering withdrawal symptoms.