



beyondblue  
the national depression initiative



## Antidepressants for the treatment of depression in children and adolescents

**A FACT SHEET FOR PARENTS  
AND OTHER CARERS**

*beyondblue* is working to increase awareness and understanding of depression, anxiety and related disorders throughout Australia.

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

# Antidepressants for the treatment of depression in children and adolescents

This fact sheet has been prepared for parents and other carers. It provides information about the use of antidepressant medications for the treatment of depression in children and young people. The information is a brief guide only and parents and other carers are strongly encouraged to ask their child's doctor for more detailed information about depression and its treatment.

## ABOUT DEPRESSION

- Depression is a common condition that affects people of all ages, including children and young people
- Depression is a serious condition. It can affect a young person's emotional and social development and lead to a range of problems such as poor performance at school or work, relationship difficulties, alcohol and drug misuse, or self-harm and suicide
- Effective treatments are available and it is important to seek help quickly.

## WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS?

Being informed about depression is a crucial part of its treatment. Knowing about the strategies available for recovery is also important. These include:

- Psychological therapies (counselling) are generally regarded as the best therapies for the treatment of depression in children and adolescents
- Two therapies, Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal therapy (IPT), are especially helpful

## With the right help you can get better

- CBT helps people to overcome the negative thinking and inactivity associated with depression while IPT helps people to deal with any relationship difficulties they may have
- Reducing the person's exposure to stress can be helpful
- Strategies to improve sleep patterns
- Antidepressant medicines.

### ARE ANTIDEPRESSANT MEDICATIONS EFFECTIVE IN THIS AGE GROUP?

While antidepressant medicines are often used to treat young people with depression, there is currently some debate among doctors about their effectiveness and safety in treating children and young people under 18 years of age. Most research done to assess the benefits of antidepressant medicines has involved adults over 18 years of age, rather than young people.

There are two main types of antidepressant medicines – tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

- TCAs are not recommended for children and adolescents with depression
- The situation regarding SSRIs is less clear-cut because the small amount of research involving children and young people shows mixed results
- Overall, the research shows that at least one SSRI (fluoxetine) appears to be effective for the treatment of depression in young people, while more research is needed on the others before we can be fully confident that they work.

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## ARE THEY SAFE TO USE IN THIS AGE GROUP?

- As with most medicines, SSRIs have some side-effects (eg nausea), however these problems are usually mild and short-term
- More recently there has been concern about one particular side-effect that seems to be connected with the use of SSRIs. There seems to be an increase in suicidal thoughts and behaviour
- To examine these concerns, health authorities in a number of countries have recently reviewed all the scientific studies relating to SSRI use in children and young people
- These reviews found some evidence for an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours in young people taking these medications. The risk, however, appears to be very low and no deaths from suicide have been reported in any of the studies.

## WHAT DO HEALTH AUTHORITIES RECOMMEND?

As a result of these findings, authorities in different countries have adopted different recommendations.

- In the UK, health authorities have advised doctors to avoid the use of SSRIs for the treatment of depression in young people, with the exception of fluoxetine
- In the USA, authorities have recommended that warnings about the possible risks be included on medication packaging and patient information leaflets
- In Australia, health authorities have reminded doctors that while they may choose to prescribe SSRIs for young people with depression, SSRIs have not been officially approved for treating depression in this age group within Australia
- Doctors therefore need to talk to their patients (and their parents, guardians or other carers) about the pros and cons associated with these medications and be cautious in their use.

# Depression is common and effective treatments are available

## SHOULD MY CHILD TAKE ANTIDEPRESSANTS?

- If your child is already taking one of these medicines, it is important not to stop them suddenly as this may cause an unpleasant 'withdrawal' reaction
- Instead, speak with your child's doctor about your concerns and seek their advice
- If you and your child decide to stop the medication, it is best to do so gradually under supervision from your doctor
- If your child has depression, your doctor may think it is useful to start on an SSRI. This may occur if the depression is severe, other treatments haven't worked, or are not available in your area. Ensure that your doctor provides you and your child with information about the medicine, including possible side-effects
- If your child is started on an SSRI your doctor will need to see him/her on a regular basis (probably weekly) until the depression starts to improve. It is important not to miss appointments
- During this time, it is important that you and your doctor look out for any changes that might suggest that your child is one of the people who could experience increased suicidal thoughts or urges while on this treatment
- Symptoms to look for include excessive restlessness or irritability, impulsive or reckless behaviour, anxiety, agitation, excessive excitement, talk about suicide, or obvious acts of self-harm
- If these symptoms are present, or if you are worried, contact your doctor immediately
- Remember, suicidal thoughts and actions are very common among people experiencing depression and do not just occur among those taking SSRIs. It is therefore important to watch for these signs in any person with depression
- It is important to know that antidepressant medications take a while to become effective.

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## SUMMARY

- Depression is a serious medical condition associated with a reduced quality of life, disability and the risk of death from suicide
- Effective treatments are available and it is important to get help early
- Psychological therapies (counselling) and general support will be effective in the majority of cases and are the recommended first-line treatment
- In some cases a doctor may believe that the use of an SSRI antidepressant is also necessary, particularly if the depression is severe or is not improving with other treatments
- While there is slight risk that SSRIs may increase suicidal thoughts and actions, this is likely to occur in only a small number of young people
- Your doctor should provide you with clear information about the expected benefits and risks associated with SSRIs and the steps to take in a crisis situation or emergency
- If your child is taking an SSRI, watch for any unusual behaviour that may indicate a worsening of the depression or an increase in suicidal thoughts and urges
- Regular medical review is important
- You can also play an important role in working with the doctor in planning and monitoring treatment and especially in supporting your child in their steps to recovery
- With appropriate treatment, the vast majority of young people will make a full recovery from depression.

# RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

## PUBLICATIONS

- ***Depression out of the shadows – a guide to understanding depression and its treatment***

Australian Women's Weekly Health Series (2003) Hickie, I. Davenport, T. Scott, E. ACP Publishing Pty Ltd.

This guide details the key features and causes of depression as well as common drug, psychological and alternative treatments.

- ***Help for depression – what works (and what doesn't)***  
Jorm, A.F. Christensen, H., Griffiths, K.M., Korten, A.E., Rodgers, B. (2001) Centre for Mental health Research. Canberra.

This booklet was written by the Centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University. It provides information about the effectiveness of treatments for depression.

- ***The SANE guide to medication and other treatments (2005).***

The guide describes the range of treatments available, including clinical care, medication, psychological therapies, support services in the community and tips for the individual.

- ***Understanding troubled minds -A guide to mental illness and its treatment***

Bloch, S & Singh, BS. Melbourne University Publishing.

*Understanding troubled minds* details a range of mental illnesses and available treatments. This publication also informs the reader psychiatrists and fellow health-workers do. (1997).

- ***When should GP's prescribe SSRI's for adolescent depression?***

Rowe, L. Tonge, B. Melvin, G. (December 2004) Australian Family Physician. Vol 33, No. 12.

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# RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

## WEBSITES

- **Ybblue** [www.ybblue.com.au](http://www.ybblue.com.au)  
Ybblue is the youth program of *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*. The Ybblue website provides information for young people who may be experiencing depression but also provides information and help for their family and friends. The website contains a number of informative fact sheets that are easily viewed and downloaded.
- **Head Room** [www.headroom.net.au](http://www.headroom.net.au)  
This website aims to inform young people, their caregivers and service providers about positive mental health. Headroom has sections that cater specifically for young people aged 6-12 years, 12-18 years, parents, friends and service providers and professionals.
- **Reachout!** [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)  
Reachout! is an interactive website designed to help young people through tough times. Reachout! aims to provide support information and referrals in a format that appeals to young people.
- **SANE Australia** [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)  
SANE Australia produces a wide range of guides and other useful publications on mental illness for consumers, carers, health professionals, students and the general community.

## TELEPHONE SERVICES

- **Just Ask** – 1300 13 11 14  
Available 9am – 5pm EST. Lifeline's rural mental information health service.
- **Kids Help Line** – 1800 551 800  
(Free call) Available 24 hours. Counselling, information and referrals for young people.
- **Lifeline** – 13 11 14  
Available 24 hours. Counselling, information and referrals.
- **National Prescribing Services Medicine Line** –  
1300 888 768 Available 9 am – 6 pm, Monday – Friday.  
Information on medication.
- **SANE Australia** – 1800 688 382  
Available business hours. Provides mental health information.