

WHICH ANTIDEPRESSANT IS BEST?

Dear Dr. K.

I've been depressed for several months and have finally decided to go ahead and take an antidepressant when my doctor offered to prescribe it. My big question for you is about all of the different medications I hear about. Which one is the best? My doctor tells me they're all the same.

Brian, Long Island

Dear Brian,

To answer your question simply, yes, your doctor is correct; all antidepressant medications prescribed today *are* alike in terms of their ability to get rid of depression. No medicine works faster than another. How they differ chiefly occurs in how they work in the brain and the potential for side effects.

It's widely accepted now that depression is a chemical imbalance in the brain. This imbalance can occur when there are obvious reasons for depression such as job loss, a death or some other loss to the person or for no good reason when, for example, there is a high risk for depression because of family history.

Many times people will not seek help for depression because they feel they should 'be strong and get through it'. If, after several weeks, you are not better or if your depression impacts on your daily life because you can't concentrate, feel overwhelmed, have no energy, do not look forward to anything and generally feel hopeless, then it's time to get treatment. Many times, someone will say to me "I'm just not myself. I'm irritable and just want to be left alone and that's not like me."

Antidepressants divide themselves into different groups depending on what neuro-hormones they affect in the brain. All of these hormones are involved in depression so it doesn't matter which one your doctor chooses.

Sometimes, people have some mood swings during the day and can be too quickly labeled as being 'bipolar'. This is unfortunate because frequently the medications used

Ask Dr. K®: Writings For Your Mental Health

for bipolar are different than the ones used for depression. That's why it's important a specialist is involved.

There are many antidepressants on the market today with SSRI's (serotonin reuptake inhibitors like Prozac, Lexapro, Celexa, Paxil and Zoloft) and NSRI's (norepinephrine/serotonin reuptake inhibitors like Effexor, Pristiq and Cymbalta) being the most used.

If you are not totally confused, one other medication, Wellbutrin, also is an antidepressant. It works only on neuro-hormone called dopamine in the brain. Side effects are usually of very low incidence. Remember that antidepressants do not work overnight and may take up to two to three weeks to really work well. You should also continue to take the medication for at least six to nine months. Sometimes people are bozo's and stop the medicine because they feel better and think they don't need it anymore. Not a good idea.

I am very pleased that you are seeking treatment for a problem that causes such psychic pain and misery and one that can be easily helped.

The antidepressant should first make you not feel so miserable. Then, when it really works well, you feel like your old self again. Do not be satisfied with just not feeling miserable anymore. Keep at it with your doctor until you feel well again.

Dr. K.