

Questions about  
**ANTIDEPRESSANTS**  
and the answers that may  
**SURPRISE YOU**

A booklet for people wondering how long  
they should take their antidepressant



You may find this booklet helpful if you are taking an antidepressant for depression and are wondering if stopping it is an option.

Why would I stop taking my antidepressant?



Will my depression return if I stop taking my antidepressant?

IS THIS ANTIDEPRESSANT STILL HELPING ME?



Could my antidepressant be causing side effects?

## What role do you want your antidepressant to have in your life?

There are many ways to treat depression. Antidepressants are one of them. Some people stop taking their antidepressant too soon, and some people continue taking it longer than they need.

Whether you stop or continue your antidepressant, be sure to check out pages 10-11 for important tools and safety planning tips.

Can you tell which of these are **FACTS**, and which are **MYTHS**?

1. Depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain and always needs an antidepressant to fix it.
2. Antidepressants can cause withdrawal symptoms when stopped.
3. If I stop my antidepressant, my depression will return.

## 1. Depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain and always needs an antidepressant to fix it.

This is a myth.

**We do not know the full picture of what causes depression and how antidepressants work to help treat it.** Chemicals in the brain, like serotonin, affect emotions and motivation. Antidepressants increase these chemicals in different ways. **But, this does not mean you need to take your medication forever.**

There are many things that can cause or worsen depression, such as:

- work/relationship stressors
- trauma or grief
- genetic traits
- medical conditions
- substance use (e.g. opioids)
- a lot of alcohol drinking
- pain

These situations are not easily treated by antidepressants.

For some people's brains, antidepressants are very helpful. About **half of people** will have a good response after starting an antidepressant for the first time.



For other people, especially those with less severe depression, using non-medication treatments is often a better option. Talking to a counsellor or a psychiatrist can be very helpful, and they may give you activities to help you understand and change your thinking.

Learn more on page 10.

## 2. Antidepressants can cause withdrawal symptoms when stopped.

This is a fact.

**Most antidepressants should NOT be stopped suddenly.** Lowering the dose slowly over time helps prevent bad withdrawal symptoms.

Withdrawal can mean nausea, dizziness, trouble sleeping, jitteriness, odd sensations, and flu-like symptoms. It is NOT dangerous and can be treated with products you can buy from a pharmacy (e.g. Gravol). Withdrawal is your body getting used to not having the antidepressant there.

For people who do feel unwell when stopping their antidepressant, it usually lasts only 1-2 weeks. Sometimes people have a lot of discomfort or symptoms that last longer than 2 weeks.

Check out page 9 for tips on how to have success when stopping your antidepressant.

## 3. If I stop my antidepressant, my depression will return.

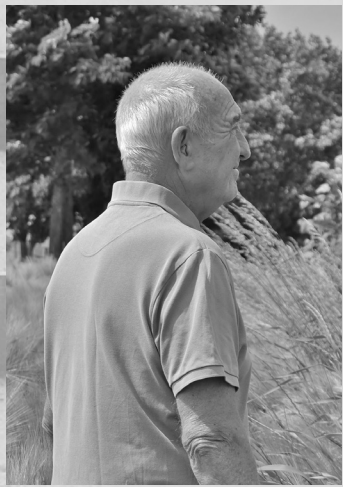
It depends on the person.

Many people have depression that comes back at different times in their life, even while still taking antidepressants.

There are some people who benefit from taking antidepressants life-long to try and prevent depression episodes from returning.

Others can safely stop taking their antidepressant 6-12 months after feeling better again. They can remain depression-free for a long time, maybe even the rest of their lives!

How can you know if stopping is the right option for you? Take the quiz on page 8 to find out if you have a good chance of success. **ALWAYS** talk to your health care providers before making any changes to your medications.



# Craig's Story

**A** while ago, I was going through a real tough period of time.

My marriage was failing. My brother and I had stopped farming, and there were discussions about selling the land, but I wasn't sure I wanted to do that. Then one of my friends died, and then another friend who was like a brother to me died.

I started staying in bed too long – not wanting to face the world. I was questioning whether I could handle all the things being thrown at me. And I was feeling some anxiety. For a while I thought, “Maybe I can beat this on my own.” But when I went to my doctor I broke down and started crying, and **we decided I would go on a medication.**

I started 10mg of citalopram, and I knew that wasn't enough. So, my doctor increased me slowly to 20mg and then 40mg until I felt better. But my intention right from the start was that once everything cleared up in my life, I would pick my moment and discuss it with my doctor and start coming off the citalopram. I wanted to use it as a tool to manage a really tough time in my life. But **I was bound and determined that once I didn't need this medication anymore, I would stop it.**

The citalopram made a difference. And I was lucky because I didn't have any side effects. **I also had a psychologist that I saw** as I needed to, to get things off my chest. I felt that helped too.

This summer I accepted the fact that I had lost some people in my life. I was divorced, but I put in the work to make my relationship with my ex-wife better. Now we chat every week. We had made the decision to sell the land, and I had accepted that there was no going back. So, I decided things were settled in my life and there were some things I can't change – **it was time to try going off the antidepressant.**

“Things were settled in my life...  
it was time to try going off the antidepressant.”

I discussed with my doctor the best method of stopping my antidepressant. I was taking citalopram 40mg, and I dropped the dose to 30mg for a week, then 20mg for a week, then 10mg for a week, and then I stopped it. **If I had felt I wasn't ready to keep reducing, I could have paused or even bumped the dose back up.** But I think I had been on the citalopram for long enough that it was OK for me to stop.

There was the odd day after I stopped where I wondered if I should be back on it, even half a pill. I sometimes asked myself, “Did I go off this too quick?” But as the days wore on, as the months wore on, the thoughts of starting the antidepressant again just drifted away. I would wake up sometimes and I would think, “You know what, I really feel good. **I'm happy now with where my life is.** Things aren't perfect. Things will never be perfect, but ... **I can manage.**”

I was lucky. I think I'm a lucky guy.

*Craig's name has been changed to protect his identity.*

## CRAIG'S TIPS

Try to use the medication as a chance to help you take care of other things in your life. The medication might help you think about your life with new eyes.

It doesn't hurt to seek professional counselling. Sit down with somebody as often as you need to work through things.

Not everyone has to be on an antidepressant, but at the same time not everybody is at the point where it is safe for them to stop. That decision will hopefully be guided by your healthcare provider.

Dropping the dose every week was the right speed for me. But it's individual, and every person could stop their antidepressant a different way.

# Can I stop my antidepressant?

## Does this describe you?

I have been feeling well for at least 6 months.	YES	NO
I have recovered well, and I am feeling like my normal self.	YES	NO
I have had less than 3 episodes of depression in the past.	YES	NO
I have never had any severe depression symptoms that were hard to treat.	YES	NO
I don't have any major stressors or upsets in my life right now.	YES	NO

✓ **If you answered YES to all of the above, stopping your antidepressant might be right for you!**

# Is stopping my antidepressant worth it?

- ✓ less pills
- ✓ less cost
- ✓ less side effects (now or in the future)



- ✗ possibly higher risk of depression returning
- ✗ possible withdrawal symptoms for a short time

**Other reasons to talk to your healthcare provider about stopping your antidepressant**

- You feel it is not helping
- You are bothered by side effects that won't go away (e.g. sexual problems, weight gain, headaches)
- You don't feel like yourself anymore
- Your depression episode was clearly caused by or worsened by a life situation that is no longer a problem

# How should I stop my antidepressant?

- ✓ Talk to your friends, family, and other supporters
- ✓ Make a plan, be patient and flexible
- ✓ Talk to your healthcare provider if things do not go as planned (e.g. bad withdrawal symptoms, thoughts of self-harm)

- ✗ Stop too soon after you start feeling better
- ✗ Stop cold turkey
- ✗ Stop without talking to your healthcare provider

## YOU'RE AT THE STEERING WHEEL!



### CHOOSE YOUR ROUTE (with your healthcare provider)

**Reduce dose QUICKLY, over weeks if...**

- you are at low risk of withdrawal or relapse
- you just want to get it over with

**Reduce dose SLOWLY, over months if...**

- you have had previous trouble stopping or withdrawal symptoms when missing a dose
- you have been taking a higher dose and/or taking for many years
- you prefer to go slowly with caution

### MAKE A SAFETY PLAN

- 📍 Know your triggers
- 📍 Know your signs of distress
- 📍 Know what to do - be prepared for setbacks and plan ahead to manage them
- 📍 Know who to call:
  - list of contacts
  - download the notOK app
  - **See page 11 for crisis support info**

**REMEMBER:** Plans can be changed as needed to meet you where you're at.

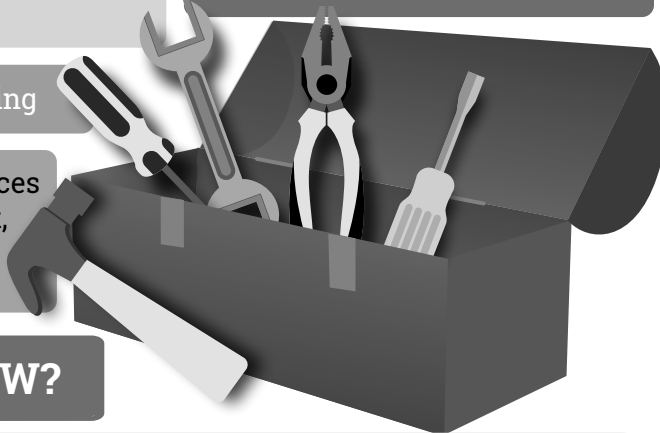
**These tools will help your chances of success whether you stop your antidepressant or continue it...**

Psychological treatment such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Meditation, mindfulness, guided self-help, or peer support groups

Professional counselling

Positive lifestyle choices (exercise, healthy diet, reduced alcohol or substance use)



## DID YOU KNOW?

Psychotherapy is just as helpful as antidepressants for less severe depression, and it can lead to lasting change and improve your success of stopping antidepressants.

## REMEMBER...

- Make goals that are possible for you
- Find the tools that are right for you
- Celebrate small successes
- Hang on to hope!

One goal for this week:	
One tool I am going to use:	
One thing I can celebrate:	
One thing I am hoping for:	

## MENTAL HEALTH FIRST-AID KIT

Add anything that will help YOU get through your down days, such as:

- Names and contact information of people you can reach out to for support
- Meaningful books, quotes, meditations, prayers
- Playful activities such as clay, colouring, puzzles
- Special pictures, cards, memories, or gifts
- Anything that reminds you of your importance and purpose



Scan the QR code for more ideas on **Non-Drug Treatments for Depression**



- **Canadian Suicide Prevention and Support**  
Call: 1-833-456-4566, Text 45645  
visit: [www.talksuicide.ca](http://www.talksuicide.ca)
- Call 8-1-1 Healthline Saskatchewan for support and advice
- Call 2-1-1 Saskatchewan or visit <https://sk.211.ca/> to learn about programs and services in your area
- **Counselling Connect Sask**  
<https://www.counsellingconnectsask.ca/>

- Talk to your health care provider if you have thoughts of harming yourself or wish to end your life
- Call 911 if you or someone else is at immediate risk of harm



# *Are you taking a medication FOR DEPRESSION?*

*Have you been taking an antidepressant for over a year?*

*Are you wondering if you can stop  
taking your antidepressant?*

*Are you afraid of withdrawal symptoms  
or of your depression returning?*

## LOOK INSIDE FOR

- facts and myths
- a true patient story
- tips & tools for managing your depression
- and more...

© 2023



RxFiles.ca



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Pharmacy  
and Nutrition

PHARMACY-NUTRITION.USASK.CA