

How to change antidepressants

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Although [starting antidepressants](#) is not outside the realm of common experience (1), the **changing** of antidepressants is shrouded in the aura of mystic voodoo that many consider to be best left to the psychiatrists. The reality, however, is that there isn't much to it.

For the first line and most common antidepressants used (SSRIs *except fluoxetine*, mirtazapine, venlafaxine and the tricyclic antidepressants):

Taper the dose of the first antidepressant by 25% per day (with complete cessation in 4-7 days). Start the second antidepressant 3 days after the cessation of the first.

When changing from one antidepressant to another, the key factor is the half life of the original drug. The longer the half life, the longer the "washout period" and the longer one has to wait before commencing the second drug. Similarly, the longer the half life of the first agent, the higher the likelihood of side-effects if the second agent is started too early.

I find the follow guide and its principles fairly useful (adapted from Holmwood C., Ilchef R. *Effective use of antidepressants*) (2):

Category A changeover (longest washout period)

- **Drugs:**
 - [fluoxetine](#)
 - [phenelzine](#)
 - [tranylcypromine](#)
- **General recommendations:**
 - Gradual withdrawal generally unnecessary; discontinuation symptoms very unlikely.
 - Wait for at least 2 weeks after stopping before starting next antidepressant
- **Specific drug information:**
 - *fluoxetine* - long half-life of parent drug and metabolite means a period of weeks is needed after it is stopped before another antidepressant can be started.
 - *phenelzine* and *tranylcypromine* - maintain drug and diet restrictions for 2-3 weeks after stopping.

Category B changeover (intermediate washout period)

- **Drugs:**
 - [SSRIs](#) (except fluoxetine)
 - [TCAs](#)
 - [mianserin](#)
 - [mirtazapine](#)
- **General recommendations:**
 - Withdrawal gradually to prevent discontinuation symptoms (particularly if higher dose or long term use).

- Usually reduce dose by 25% per day (when switching).
- Wait 2-4 days after stopping before starting next antidepressant.
- **Specific drug information:**
 - SSRIs - the potential for discontinuation symptoms is probably greater with [paroxetine](#) than other SSRIs.

Category C changeover (shortest washout period)

- **Drugs:**
 - [moclobemide](#)
 - [reboxetine](#)
 - [venlafaxine](#)
- **General recommendations:**
 - Wait for 1-2 days after stopping before starting next antidepressant.
- **Specific drug information:**
 - moclobemide - discontinuation symptoms not reported.
 - venlafaxine - withdraw gradually to prevent discontinuation symptoms (discontinuation syndrome is similar to SSRIs).

Reference article

(1) Su M. How to start antidepressants [electronic article]. *The Medicine Box*. Last updated: 19 June 2006. [[Link](#)]

(2) Holmwood C., Ilchef R. (reviewers). Effective use of antidepressants. *National Prescribing Service Limited*. Last updated: November 2005.

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