



Using antidepressant medication to treat depression during pregnancy and following the birth

Antidepressant medication has been shown to be helpful for many women dealing with moderate to severe depression. However, many women are reluctant to take medication during pregnancy and while breastfeeding because they are worried about how their babies may be affected.

Research on the safety of taking medications during pregnancy and lactation is being done in many places around the world. The BC Reproductive Mental Health Program based at BC Women's Hospital in Vancouver, BC provides a consultation service offering advice to physicians and other health care providers on the use of medications during pregnancy and the months following the birth. There are some medications that have been judged by experts in the field to be quite safe to take during pregnancy and breastfeeding. In addition, it is important to consider the impact of depression symptoms on the baby. Your health professional should be able to provide you with guidance about

the safety of medications for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and their babies.

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Listed below are some commonly asked questions about taking medication during pregnancy and following the birth.

If I start taking medication to treat my depression, will I have to stay on medication for the rest of my life?

Probably not. Although every case is different, many women who choose to take antidepressant medication for treatment of depression during pregnancy and following the birth of their baby will later make a decision with their physician to gradually stop taking their medication after approximately 1 year. However, this depends on the severity and duration of the depression. For the woman who has at least 3 episodes of recurring depression, the option of remaining on medication longer should be evaluated. This important decision is usually discussed with the prescribing physician who can help the woman to make a decision that will work well for her. Medication should never be stopped suddenly or without medical advice.



Some medications have to be decreased slowly to prevent symptoms such as headaches or stomach upset.

If I breastfeed while taking medication, will the medication harm the baby?

Probably not. Research suggests that you can breastfeed when taking certain antidepressant medications. A small amount of medication does get into the breast milk but usually does not have a negative effect on the baby. Your physician will be able to help you to choose a medication that is safest for the baby.

Will the medication have unpleasant side effects? It depends. Like other prescription medications, antidepressants carry the risk of side effects. There is a range of side effects, and since everyone is unique, side effects will differ. Most side effects decrease after a few weeks. You should tell your health care professional about any side effects that persist and are bothersome to you.

If I take medication, will I still need to make other life changes? Yes.

Antidepressant medications often lessen the depressive symptoms and give you more energy. This may make it easier for you to identify and change patterns

of thinking and behaviour that may be contributing to your depression.

Will taking antidepressant medication interfere with my psychological therapy?

No. Many women choose to use both antidepressant medication and a form of psychological therapy such as Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy or Interpersonal Therapy. In cases of more severe depression, medication may help the woman to have enough energy and motivation to work on and apply the skills that she is learning in her psychological treatment.

Will complementary therapies help me with my depression?

Many women ask about complementary medicines and therapies such as herbal supplements or other health practices, e.g. massage therapy, acupuncture and meditation. Currently, there is not enough research to recommend these as treatment approaches for depression. However, some women may find that these can help as part of their self-care strategies. It is important that you check with your health care provider before beginning any complementary treatments to make sure that they are safe for pregnant and breastfeeding women.