

“Are there any dangerous side effects I should know about?”

As a whole, antidepressants are relatively safe medications. The exception to this is the older generation of antidepressants, the tricyclics and MAOIs, which, if not taken correctly, could have very serious physical side effects. In fact, if you take more than prescribed, you could develop a life-threatening reaction. In contrast, the newer generation of antidepressants, such as the SSRIs and SNRIs, are unlikely to cause any serious injury, even with a fairly significant overdose. However, you should never take more than prescribed and, if you or someone you know does, you should contact your doctor immediately or go to the nearest emergency room. There can always be rare, unexpected reactions with an overdose of any medication.

Despite an overall high side-effect burden compared to the newer generation antidepressants, doctors still prescribe tricyclic antidepressants because they are inexpensive and uniquely effective for certain types of depression. Tricyclics are safe when taken as prescribed. However, if taken in too large of quantities, tricyclics can cause heart rhythm changes that could be fatal. No one knows how much is too much, and it may depend on what other medicines you take and whether you have an underlying heart problem. To be safe, if you have taken more than you are supposed to, you should go to the closest emergency room.

MAOIs are also very effective antidepressants and are often used for people who have tried several other antidepressants without success. As a class, they carry the greatest risk. Certain medicines and foods must be avoided if you take an MAOI to prevent a possible, life-threatening increase in blood pressure (see Table 7A “Sample List of Foods to Avoid with MAOIs” on page xx). If you experience a severe headache, flushing, or confusion, you should go to an emergency room as soon as possible since these could be signs of severe blood pressure changes from an MAOI reaction. Some people do not stick rigidly to the MAOI diet but still never experience a problem, while others are exquisitely sensitive. Everyone is encouraged to comply with the diet because you can never predict how sensitive you may be. If MAOIs dramatically improve the quality of your life, the dietary restrictions are a minor inconvenience.

A rare problem that can occur with the newer antidepressants is *serotonin syndrome*. If you are on a high dose of a serotonin antidepressant or take one or more other medicines that also impact serotonin levels, you may be warned by your doctor or pharmacist to watch out for signs of

serotonin syndrome (see Table 7B “Medicines that Can Cause Serotonin Syndrome” on page 144). This includes diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and

Table 7-A

Sample List of Foods to Avoid with MAOIs

- Aged cheeses, some processed cheeses (cottage cheese, cream cheese, pot cheese, and ricotta cheese are allowed)
- Chianti, vermouth, sherry, red wines, tap beer, nonalcoholic beer and wine
- Broad (fava) beans
- Sauerkraut
- Italian green beans
- Snow pea pods
- Soy products, especially soy sauce and tofu
- Aged or cured meats
- Caviar
- Liver
- Concentrated yeast extract, brewer’s yeast, yeast supplements, yeast paste (marmite), miso (commercial leavened products with baker’s yeast are allowed)
- Acidophilus and products with acidophilus
- Any food that is not fresh, overripe, close to expiration date

Sample List of Medicines to Avoid with MAOIs

- All serotonin antidepressants
- Demerol
- Cold preparations
- Cough medicines with decongestants
- Sinus medications
- Nose drops or nasal sprays
- Hayfever medications
- Diet pills
- Amphetamines

This list is not meant to be comprehensive.