

How do I come off tricyclics?

We recommend reducing the dose of tricyclics in steps of 10-25mg every 3 days. Because they aid sleep, you may not sleep well for a night or two after you've stopped taking them. They are not addictive and you should not feel unwell when you stop them.

Further information

Further information is available from:

www.rcoa.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/patient-information

If you would like a leaflet from the Faculty of Pain Medicine and do not have access to the internet, please call the Pain Clinic on 01872 252792.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690



Tricyclics

Information for Pain Clinic patients



Who is this leaflet for?

Your doctor has suggested that you try a tricyclic medication to help you to manage your pain condition. Examples of tricyclics are amitriptyline, nortriptyline, clomipramine and imipramine. This leaflet explains how tricyclics work and describes how you should take them.

What do these drugs do?

These drugs increase the amount of specific nerve transmitters in the nervous system, reducing pain messages arriving in the brain.

When should take the medication?

Start by taking the medicine 2 hours before you want to go to sleep at night. If you struggle to wake up in the morning, take it earlier.

Will the medications reduce my pain?

We hope so, but in truth we don't know until you have tried them. The principles of trying a new pain medication are:

1. Find the best dose. This is difficult with tricyclic medications. You will have been given a starting dose and you may have been given a higher maximum dose.* Adjust the dose every 3 weeks until you find the dose that gives the best balance between benefits and side effects. If two different doses seem to give the same effect, take the lower dose.
2. Typically, after you start your drug or increase the dose, any side-effects that you are to experience will come on after the first dose, and will lessen over several days. They may not go away completely. Any benefits that you are to experience will not come on for several days and will not reach full strength for about 3 weeks. Therefore be patient, tolerate the side-effects, and wait 3 weeks before considering whether to raise the dose again. Every 3 weeks, if things are better, you could try raising the dose, but no higher than the maximum you have been advised.
3. Stay on the best dose for a month.
4. If after a month on the best dose you are not **sure** that the drug has caused your quality of life to improve overall, you should come off the drug.

* A typical dosing plan is: amitriptyline, starting dose 10mg once daily, maximum dose 30mg once daily.

What are the side effects?

There is a leaflet in the medication box that explains all the effects, good or bad, that a medication **might** have. Possible side effects include sedation, dry mouth and constipation. They may reduce urinary flow and should not be taken by patients with some types of glaucoma. They may cause the heart to race in some types of heart condition. Read the label and see your GP if you feel that you might have been prescribed the drug in error.

If the drug makes you drowsy, do not drive. Alcohol is permissible but will make you more drowsy than usual.

Other than relieving pain, tricyclic drugs have other effects that can be good as well as bad. They may for example improve your sleep, or your mood. The task is to add all the effects together and ask: 'Has my overall quality of life improved significantly since taking the drugs?' If the answer is not 'definitely', consider weaning yourself off them again.

How long should I stay on my medication?

If the condition being treated gets better, you should wean off pain medications. Even if it does not, you should wean off your pain killers anyway after 6-12 months. Pain changes over time, and a medication that was helping a year ago may not be helping any more. We therefore advise that you wean off medications after 6 – 12 months and stay off them for 2 weeks. If you conclude that they had definitely been working, restart them gradually, as before.

The leaflet doesn't say it's a painkiller!

Tricyclics were originally used for treating depression. It turned out that they helped patients with pain, even when taken in doses so low that would have no effect on depression. The leaflet reflects the original condition for which the drug was licensed. Using drugs 'off license' in this way is a common and legitimate way of using them.