

# Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)

## What are SSRIs?

These medicines are a type of antidepressant. They are most commonly used to treat depression and anxiety.

They can also be used to treat other types of illnesses (such as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)).

You are taking:

- Citalopram (say *sit-al-low-pram*)
- Escitalopram (say *ess-it-al-low-pram*)
- Fluoxetine (say *flu-ox-uh-teen*)
- Fluvoxamine (say *flu-vox-uh-mean*)
- Paroxetine (say *per-ox-uh-teen*)
- Sertraline (say *sir-trah-lean*)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

You are taking this medicine for:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## How do SSRIs work?

Depression and anxiety can happen when the chemicals in your brain such as serotonin (say *sara-toe-nin*) are out-of-balance.

SSRIs work by restoring the balance of serotonin in the brain. This can help improve your:

- energy and mood
- interest in activities
- appetite
- sleep
- calmness
- concentration

It can also help you:

- have less harmful thoughts and behaviours

## How quickly will it start working?

Some of your symptoms might get better before others.

- It could take 1 to 2 weeks to feel like you have more energy, are sleeping better, and have more of an appetite.
- It could take 4 to 8 weeks for your low mood to improve or for you to feel less depressed.
- It could take several weeks or longer for you to feel less anxious, or experience less symptoms of OCD or PTSD.

## How do I take my SSRI?

- Take your SSRI regularly as prescribed.
- You can take it with or without food.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible.
- If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and return to your regular schedule. Do not take 2 doses at the same time.

## Why is it important to keep taking it?

- Always take the amount you are supposed to take (the dose written on the prescription label).
- If you do not take an SSRI as prescribed, the amount of medicine in your body can get too low, making it not work as well and increase the chances of side effects.
- Do not change how much you take. Do not stop taking it without talking to your doctor.
- If you suddenly stop taking an SSRI, you could experience certain unwanted effects such as not being able to sleep (insomnia), headaches, feeling sick to your stomach (nausea), and feeling like you have the flu.

### What should I look out for?

Here are some possible side effects and what to do if you notice them.

#### Common Side Effects



**a) Constipation or diarrhea**

Keep well hydrated by drinking fluids. Water is best.  
If you are constipated, add fibre to your meals such as bran, vegetables, and fruit.



**b) Dizziness**

Take your time getting up from a sitting or lying position.  
Keep well hydrated by drinking fluids. Water is best.  
Limit how much alcohol you drink.



**c) Drowsiness**

If you are drowsy during the day, take this medicine at bedtime. Caution: It is dangerous to drive or operate machinery when drowsy.



**d) Headache**

This should improve over time. Tell your doctor and/or pharmacist if this keeps bothering you.



**e) Weight gain**

Choose healthy foods and exercise regularly.  
Drink water, instead of sugary beverages.



**f) Less interest in sex**

Talk to your doctor and/or pharmacist about ways to have more interest.



**g) Feeling nervous (agitated)**

Take your medicine in the morning.  
Drink less coffee.  
This side effect should improve over time (after 1 to 2 weeks).



**h) Feeling sick to the stomach (nausea)**

Eat small meals more often during the day.  
Take your medicine with food. Drink water.



**i) Trouble sleeping (insomnia)**

Drink less coffee.  
Be active and exercise during the day.

#### Rare but Serious Side Effects

**a) Serotonin syndrome**

This happens when there is too much serotonin in your body. It can happen when an SSRI is taken with certain other medicines or natural health products.

Early symptoms include feeling confused, feeling agitated, muscle twitching, sweating, shivering, and/or diarrhea.

Serious symptoms include a very high fever, seizures, heart skipping beats, and/or blacking out.

**b) Low sodium**

SSRIs can lower the amount of sodium (salt) in your blood. Early symptoms of a low sodium blood level include feeling sick to your stomach (nausea), headache, feeling confused, feeling very tired all the time, and/or muscle spasms.

Serious symptoms include throwing up (vomiting), a really bad headache, and/or muscle cramps. Rarely, it can cause seizures.

**c) Bleeding**

SSRIs can increase the chances of bleeding. This can also increase when an SSRI is taken with certain other medicines, such as some pain medications like ibuprofen or naproxen (note: acetaminophen does not have this risk).

Watch for symptoms of bleeding inside your body. Early symptoms include bright red or dark red blood in your bowel movements (poop), and/or feeling very tired. Serious symptoms of bleeding include fainting, throwing up blood, a really bad headache, sudden blurred vision, and/or weakness to one half of the body.

### When should I get help?

#### See your doctor as soon as possible if:

- Your symptoms of depression, anxiety, OCD, or PTSD are getting worse or returning.
- You are feeling hopeless, or you feel that there is no way to solve the problem or end the pain.
- Any of the common side effects do not go away or gets worse.
- You suddenly stop taking your SSRI.

#### Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

- You feel like acting on thoughts of harming yourself and/or others.
- You notice early symptoms of serotonin syndrome, low sodium, or bleeding.

#### Call 9-1-1 if:

- You have any serious symptoms of serotonin syndrome, low sodium, or bleeding.

### What else should I know?

Other medicines can change how SSRIs work.

Always check with your doctor and/or pharmacist before taking any other medicines, including prescription, over-the-counter (especially ibuprofen or naproxen), and herbal medicines (especially St. John's Wort).

### It's good to ask questions

Anytime you have any questions or concerns about taking this medicine, talk with one of your healthcare team.

**Call 8-1-1 (HealthLinkBC)** after hours and for any other health advice.

HealthLinkBC is open 24 hours a day and available in 130 languages. For an interpreter, say your language in English. Wait until an interpreter comes on the phone.

This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.