



COLLEGE OF MEDICINE TUCSON

Arizona Pediatric
Psychiatry Access Line

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) FAQ

How long do SSRIs take to work?

4-6 weeks at an effective dose.

Can I just take SSRIs when I need them?

No – SSRIs must be taken daily to be effective.

What are the most common side effects?

The most common side effects are gastrointestinal symptoms including nausea, stomachaches, and/or diarrhea), headaches, sleep changes, agitation, irritability, activation. Most of the common side effects like stomach symptoms will go away – they just take a little time to resolve. Taking the dose with food or changing the time of day the dose is taken may help.

Less common but possible side effects include mania, sexual side effects, easy bruising, or bleeding.

Serotonin syndrome is a rare but possible side effect that can occur if too much serotonin accumulates in the body. This is unlikely to occur with prescribed doses of SSRIs but more common if they are combined with other medications that can increase serotonin. **Always let all your doctors know which medications you are taking before adding additional medication.**

What is activation?

Excessive and uncomfortable restlessness that typically occurs early in treatment or after a dose change. It can look like an increase in irritability, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. Activation is typically very brief but if it is not, it is recommended to call your doctor and discuss lowering the medication dose or stopping the medication.

What is the FDA boxed warning?

Antidepressant medications, including SSRIs, have an FDA boxed warning that states they are “associated with increased suicidal thinking and/or behavior in a small proportion of children and adolescents, especially during the early stages of treatment”. These adverse events, mostly suicidal thoughts, were reported at 4% in the children and adolescents taking an SSRI and at 2% in the those taking a placebo. More recent, larger studies suggest an even lower risk. Patients taking SSRIs will be monitored and screened for suicidal thoughts and behaviors closely during early treatment.

Will my dose be changed during treatment?

Most likely yes – providers like to start very low as it helps avoid side effects and get your body used to the medication but often need to increase the dose to more effectively treat your symptoms. Your care team’s goal is always the lowest dose necessary, while ensuring your symptoms are fully treated.

References:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (2018). Depression: Parents’ Medication Guide. https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/resource_centers/resources/med_guides/DepressionGuide-web.pdf