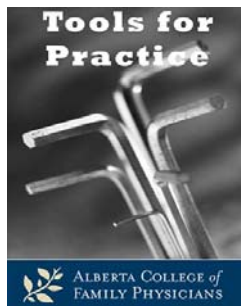


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How Long Before Antidepressants Work: Happy news?

Clinical Question: How quickly are the effects of antidepressants clinically evident?

Evidence

A large meta-analysis addresses this question.

- A meta-analysis¹ combining 50 trials (10,121 depressed patients) looked at response to SSRI medications, compared to placebo, at a series of time intervals.
 - o At 1 week, the average patient gets about 1/3 of the total absolute benefit
 - o The incremental benefit is greatest at week one and the magnitude of the benefits gradually declines week by week
 - o To get a 50% reduction in the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HRSD or HAM-D),
 - At 1 week, number needed to treat (NNT) is 25
 - At 6 weeks, NNT is 9

Context

- The results of the meta-analysis above confirm those of another meta-analysis²
 - o That study also found antidepressants result in statistically significant improvement in clinically important outcomes within the first week.
- Since previous trials involved fewer patients, they were underpowered to adequately assess early response; this led to the misconception that SSRIs always take 4–6 weeks to work.
- Note: NNT describes the benefit of SSRI over placebo but the placebo response in depression is high. In practice we will see more than 1 in every 25 or 9 patients improving at 1 and 6 weeks, respectively.

Bottom-line: Antidepressants begin to work as early as one week and continue to provide incremental benefits weekly for 6 weeks.

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1. [Arch Gen Psychiatry 2006; 63: 1217-23.](#)
2. [J Clin Psychopharmacol 2006;26:56-60.](#)

Tools for Practice is a biweekly article summarizing medical evidence with a focus on topical issues and practice modifying information. It is coordinated by G. Michael Allan, MD, CCFP and the content is written by practising family physicians. Archived articles are available on the Towards Optimized Practice website.

This communication reflects the opinion of the author and does not necessarily mirror the perspective and policy of the Alberta College of Family Physicians.