

MIXING ALCOHOL AND ANTIDEPRESSANTS: THE FACTS

KEY HEALTH MESSAGES

- Drinking whilst taking antidepressant medication can make you feel more intoxicated and drowsier than alcohol would alone and increase the risk of injury. If you're over 18 years and you do decide to drink, speak with your doctor about possible drug interactions. Remember the brain is still developing until age 25.
- Poor mental health can make you more vulnerable to alcohol problems and drinking alcohol can make symptoms of mental illness worse. Because alcohol and mental health problems can occur together, be sure to speak with your doctor about repeated patterns of drinking.
- Regular and consistent use of medication is very important to help manage mental health symptoms, so remember not to skip a dose of antidepressants, and avoid drinking alcohol.

1. WHAT ARE ANTIDEPRESSANTS AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

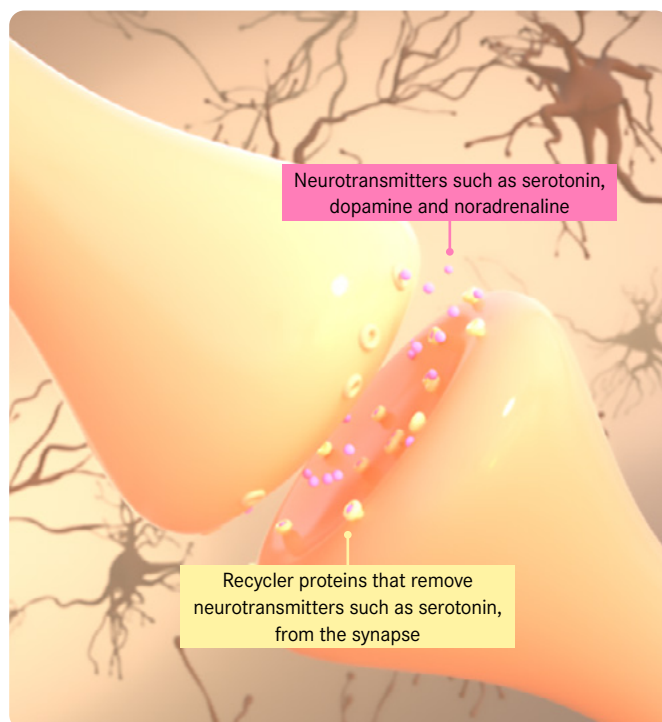
Antidepressants are prescribed to help treat mental health problems, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety. You might be surprised that antidepressants are one of the most commonly prescribed drugs in Australia¹. Around 1 in 7 adults and 1 in 10 teens take antidepressants daily in Australia^{2,3}. These medicines target neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) in the brain linked to low mood, such as serotonin, noradrenaline and dopamine⁴. Common antidepressants are 'selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors' (SSRIs), also known by their brand names, like Lexapro, Cipramil and Prozac. SSRIs work by increasing levels of serotonin in the brain by blocking the recycling of serotonin from the space between nerve cells (see image opposite). This helps serotonin stay around for longer and help improve mood⁵.

Other antidepressants include 'serotonin and noradrenaline re-uptake inhibitors' and 'tricyclic antidepressants', which have a similar effect on neurotransmitters in the brain⁶.

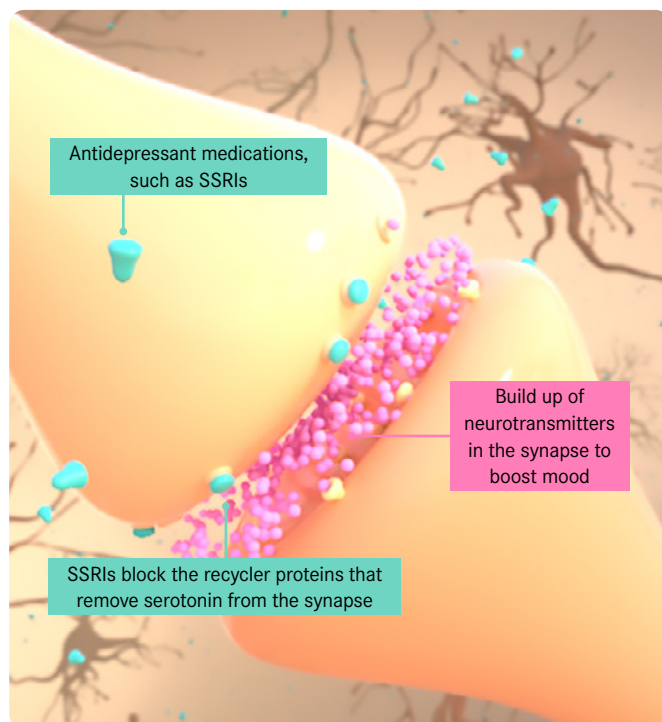
It can take weeks for the medication to start having an effect, and regular and consistent use is very important^{7,8}. Remember, symptoms vary from person to person, and there's no one size fits all for mental healthcare.



NEUROTRANSMITTERS SUCH AS SEROTONIN IN THE SYNAPSE OF A NERVE CELL



SSRIs BLOCK THE RE-UP TAKE OF SEROTONIN, SO IT BUILDS UP IN THE SYNAPSE



2. CAN ANTIDEPRESSANTS AND ALCOHOL INTERACT IN THE BODY?

Some types of antidepressants can interact with alcohol in the body⁹. This can happen for many reasons, for example, some antidepressants have side-effects such as drowsiness, reduced attention and insomnia^{10,11}, which when combined with alcohol (a depressant) can cause enhanced sedation^{12,13}.

This means, using antidepressants and alcohol together can slow down reaction-time, affect co-ordination and decision making, and lead to greater levels of drowsiness than taking either drug alone¹⁴. This increases

the chance of injury and other negative experiences associated with drinking, such as vomiting, fights and unwanted sexual experiences¹⁵.

Alcohol slows down brain activity in the frontal lobe of the brain, making it harder to regulate stress and other emotions¹⁶. Drinking alcohol can also intensify negative emotions and worsen underlying mood. The safest thing during brain development (which continues until about age 25), is not to use alcohol at all¹⁷ particularly if also prescribed antidepressant medication.

3. CAN DRINKING ALCOHOL MAKE MY MENTAL HEALTH WORSE?

In the days following drinking, you can feel anxious, down and depleted^{18,19}. In part, this is because alcohol is a depressant and can disrupt sleep patterns^{20,21}, cause dehydration, and the by-products of alcohol metabolism, such as acetaldehyde can make some people feel anxious^{22,23}. In addition, when drinking, people are more likely to miss or skip a dose of antidepressant medication, which can bring about withdrawal or a 'crash' (this is sometimes called 'discontinuation syndrome') and prevent the medication from working^{24,25}. It's important not to miss a dose of antidepressants, and avoid alcohol consumption.

TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH, DON'T MISS A DOSE OF ANTIDEPRESSANTS AND SPEAK WITH YOUR DOCTOR WHEN YOU TURN 18 AS ALCOHOL USE CAN IMPACT YOUR MOOD AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT.



There is also a strong link between frequent heavy drinking and symptoms of poor mental health^{26,27}. One important question is: which one comes first? Do individuals with anxiety and/or depression drink to cope with their symptoms (sometimes called 'self-medication'), or does drinking directly cause symptoms of anxiety and/or depression? The findings show that both are true, and there's a two-way relationship between poor mental health, and problematic alcohol use^{28,29}. This can create a vicious cycle, where one disorder serves to maintain and worsen the other. To take care of your mental health, it's important not to skip a dose of antidepressants and speak with your doctor when you turn 18 as alcohol use can impact your mood and brain development^{17,30}.

Australian Guidelines recommend that to reduce the risk of injury and other harms to your health, children and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol, read more [here](#).

SPEAK WITH SOMEONE, TODAY

Some of this information may cause distress. The following support services are available 24-hours, 7 days:

Web Chat

Monday to Friday 8.30am – 5pm (including public holidays)

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

1800 250 015

Beyond Blue

1300 224 636

Kids Helpline

1800 551 800

Lifeline

13 11 14

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

Family Drug Support

1300 368 186

Mental Health Line

1800 011 511



This factsheet provides key references and supporting evidence for the accompanying educational resources on alcohol and antidepressant use. These resources are designed for schools to use in class, for young people seeking further information, and for parents to assist in conversations with young people.

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