



**In each issue of The Point, we look at one of the most common queries received by the SAMH Information Service.**

**Q. What will happen if I try to come off my psychiatric medication?**

**A. Recent reports about antidepressants have prompted some people to re-assess their current situations with their medications.**

Some feel that they would like to come off their medication. This might be because they feel they are better, or because their medication doesn't seem to be helping. It is important to discuss coming off medication with your doctor beforehand. Psychiatric medication should never be stopped abruptly as this can lead to acute withdrawal symptoms.

SAMH's research into psychiatric drugs, "All You Need to Know?" found that over 60% of those who took part in the study had at some point asked their doctor about coming off medication. The study found that, where people were supported to stop taking a drug, only a small proportion became unwell as a result. However,

where people had stopped without support, it was much more common to become unwell.

Withdrawing from medication can result in the body experiencing symptoms very like the original ones which led you to take medication in the first place so it is important to speak to your doctor before starting to cut down. Your doctor will probably advise you to reduce your dosage gradually, and to stay on each new dosage for at least a couple of weeks before trying another reduction for the same amount of time if they can.

Drugs have what is known as a half-life. The half-life is the amount of time that the body takes to metabolise (use) half of the dose of the drug consumed.

This does not mean that the effects of the drug last that long, but the remaining drug in the system will affect the body. When someone takes a drug, the body becomes tolerant to it after prolonged use; this may mean that the person no longer feels the benefits of the drug or that they need a higher dose for the drug to have the desired effect.

The amount of time on the drug will have a bearing on the withdrawal period. If you have only been taking the drug for a few weeks, there should not be any problems coming off it, but it should still be gradually reduced.

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Not everyone will experience withdrawal symptoms. SAMH's research found that half of those who had stopped taking an SSRI (a type of anti-depressant) had experienced unwanted effects, a third did so when coming off tricyclic and related anti-depressants and around 40% experienced unwanted effects when coming off either anti-psychotics or mood stabilisers.

The types of drug taken can have an effect on the withdrawal symptoms being experienced. The most common include nausea, dizziness, headaches, insomnia and a recurrence of the original symptoms.

Some people cope well with coming off medication. They may use other techniques such as relaxation, exercise or alternative therapies to help them.

### **Some tips for withdrawing or cutting down**

Many people have found it better not to set targets for reducing medication, as this creates pressure. Instead, ask the doctor about a withdrawal plan in which your dose will be gradually reduced.

Be aware that it may take a long time; some people have needed over a year to completely come off medication.

As well as speaking to your doctor, you can also ask a pharmacist for advice, as they know a great deal about medication.

Some people have found that, if they are experiencing difficulties in withdrawing from medication, it is helpful to do something active or that requires concentration, in order to move their focus away from their withdrawal.

It is important to have support throughout this process: not only from a doctor but if possible from family, friends or a support group.

There are many resources that you can use to help you decide whether it is right for you to come off your medication, and if so, how to cope with it.

### **Here are a few that you might find helpful:**

[Making Sense of Coming off Psychiatric Drugs](#) booklet available from [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

#### [Coming off psychiatric drugs](#)

successful withdrawal from neuroleptics, antidepressants, lithium, carbamazepine and tranquilisers: a book by Peter Lehmann

#### [Coming Off Psychiatric Medication](#)

website run by Dr Rufus May, [www.comingoff.com](http://www.comingoff.com)

#### [All You Need to Know?](#)

Scottish Survey of People's Experience of Psychiatric Drugs, [www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)