

Medicines to treat depression

The list of medicines used to treat depression can be confusing at best, even dangerous to the individual who attempts to self-medicate, either through misuse of prescription drugs or abusing alcohol or illicit drugs to alleviate depression.

While impossible to list them all here, there are three primary groups of anti-depressants.

■ **MAO inhibitors:** MAO inhibitors block the action of monoamine oxidase, an enzyme which breaks down dopamine, a neurotransmitter essential to healthy brain function. While these drugs can effectively treat depression they can have serious side effects, especially when taken in combination with other drugs.

■ **Tricyclics:** The precursors to SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), tricyclics stimulate higher production of the neurotransmitters serotonin and norepinephrine. While these drugs are still widely used their side effects — drowsiness, dry mouth, etc. — led pharmacologists to develop the next generation of SSRIs like Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil.

■ **SSRIs:** The SSRIs block the reuptake of serotonin and, in some cases, norepinephrine, thereby assisting the brain in its natural production of these neurological enzymes.

All these drugs basically assist in the production or regulation of neurotransmitters, chemicals which operate in the synapses between neurons, or nerve cells, in the central nervous system.

Because depression comes in many types — endogenous, dysthymic, bipolar, seasonal affective disorder major depression, to name just a few — no one medication is a cure-all.

Doctors will often try a combination of drugs both to alleviate side effects and to regulate moods.

When nothing else works, consumers (patients) will sometimes undergo electroshock (ECT) therapy. Much feared and maligned, ECT treatment has vastly improved since its early days, when a grand-mal seizure was induced by applying electrical shock to the cerebral cortex.

While the basic theory is unchanged (a frontal-lobe seizure produces a state of calm and restores normal brain function) ECT uses much smaller and shorter dosages of electricity in an effort to reduce such side effects as memory loss.

— STEPHEN ROW