

# Using SSRIs to treat depression and anxiety in children and youth

One out of every 5 children and youth in Canada has a diagnosable mental illness. Of these, anxiety disorders and depression are the most common. Mental illness can make it difficult for children and youth to do well in school, to make friends or to become independent from their parents. Children and youth with mental illness may have trouble reaching their developmental milestones. Their physical health can also be affected.

If you think your child or teen is struggling with a mental health problem, the most important thing is to get help early. This can prevent problems from becoming more serious, and can lessen the effect on your child's or teen's development.

## How are depression and anxiety treated?

There are many ways to help children and youth struggling with depression and anxiety. You and your child's doctor will work together to find a treatment that works best for your child.

Depression and anxiety are usually treated with a psychotherapy (talk therapy), medicine, or a combination of both.

## What type of medication is used to treat depression and anxiety?

SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), are medications that may be used to treat depression and anxiety disorders. Some examples of SSRIs are: fluoxetine (Prozac), citalopram (Celexa), sertraline (Zoloft) and escitalopram (Cipralex).

SSRIs work in the brain to help certain natural chemicals (neurotransmitters), which are used to communicate between brain cells, manage a person's mood.

# Are SSRIs safe for children and teens?

While SSRIs have not been formally approved for use in children and teens in Canada, some are approved in the United States. Your doctor will only prescribe these medications for your child or teen when the potential benefits of using an SSRI outweigh the potential risks of not using them.

**SSRIs are NOT addictive.**

## Does my child have to take medication?

You and your child's doctor will discuss treatment options, including the benefits and risks of taking an SSRI. Without treatment, your child's mental illness could lead to more serious health problems.

## How long will my child need to take medication?

The goal of treatment is to fully eliminate all symptoms of depression and anxiety and help your child get back to feeling well every day. It will take at least a few weeks for this to happen, and some symptoms may get better faster than others.

Once the medication is working well, your child or teen will need to stay on the medication for at least 6 to 12 months to help reduce the chance of a relapse. **Never stop your child's medication suddenly.**

**You should only start to reduce your child's medication with the help of your doctor.** They will tell you how to decrease the dose slowly and over time. It's best to do this during a period of time that is as stress-free as possible for your child or teen.

## Are there any side effects of taking an SSRI?

Most side effects are mild and temporary. Your child may:

- have an upset stomach,
- notice changes to sleep (have trouble falling asleep, wake frequently, or feel more tired than usual),
- feel unusually restless,
- have headaches, or

- have appetite changes.

In most cases, these side effects should decrease over time. If you have any other problems, or if these side effects become a problem, talk to your doctor.

## When should I call a doctor?

If your child or teen is taking an SSRI, your doctor will monitor your child's symptoms closely on a regular basis.

You should call your doctor immediately if your child or teen experiences any of these uncommon side effects:

- becomes impulsive (such as trying risky behaviours) or hyperactive.
- becomes uncharacteristically happy or irritable.
- shows signs of self-harm (hurting oneself)
- talks about or gives any indication they are thinking about suicide.

## Additional resources

- Anxiety and depression: Recognizing the early warning signs (Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development)  
([http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pages/PDF/Anxiety-depression\\_ANGmcP.pdf](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pages/PDF/Anxiety-depression_ANGmcP.pdf))
- Anxiety 101: What You and Your Child Need to Know About Anxiety (Anxiety BC)  
(<https://www.anxietybc.com/parenting/anxiety-101>)
- Find Mental Health Help in Your Area (eMentalHealth.ca)  
(<http://www.ementalhealth.ca/>)
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health  
(<http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/Pages/home.aspx>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee

- Public Education Advisory Committee

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