



NICE updates antidepressant guidelines to reflect severity and length of withdrawal symptoms

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The BMJ

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has amended its guidelines¹ on depression to recognise the severity and length of antidepressant withdrawal symptoms.

The guidance on treating depression in adults now states that withdrawal symptoms may be severe and protracted in some patients.

NICE's previous guideline, which was originally published in 2009 and updated last year, said that withdrawal symptoms are "usually mild and self limiting over about one week."²

But in an amendment, NICE acknowledges that "there is substantial variation in people's experience, with symptoms lasting much longer (sometimes months or more) and being more severe for some patients."

Clinicians should "advise people taking antidepressant medication that, before stopping it, they should discuss this with their practitioner," the updated guideline says.

The change comes amid growing pressure³ from medical bodies and experts for NICE to take account of new evidence.

In a letter^{4,5} published in *The BMJ* in May 2019, a group of clinicians and academics wrote, "We think that NICE's current position on antidepressant withdrawal (first established in 2004) not only was advanced on insufficient evidence but is now widely countered by subsequent research."

James Davies, psychotherapist and lead author of the letter published in *The BMJ*, said the change was "hugely significant." "This is the first time any national clinical guideline has acknowledged severe and protracted antidepressant withdrawal to this extent," he said.

"Now severe and protracted withdrawal has been officially recognised, we must never again misdiagnose withdrawal as relapse or deny the patient is in severe pain. We must also now

press ahead with withdrawal services and a helpline for those who have become dependent on these and other prescribed drugs."

NICE is still consulting⁶ on a full update to its depression guidelines but is yet to confirm a publication date. The body initially intended to publish a full update in January 2018, but chose to delay and re-consult on the plans after experts raised concerns at what they viewed as "significant flaws in methodology, lack of transparency, and inconsistencies in the document."⁷

Paul Chrisp, director of the Centre for Guidelines at NICE, said, "We have amended the guideline to recognise the emerging evidence on the severity and duration of antidepressant withdrawal symptoms."

"The updated recommendations are in line with the statement from the Royal College of Psychiatrists and were agreed by our independent committee."

- 1 National Institute for Care and Health Excellence. Depression in adults: recognition and management. 2019. www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg90/chapter/1-Guidance#continuation-and-relapse-prevention.
- 2 National Institute for Care and Health Excellence. Depression in adults: recognition and management: clinical guideline CG90. 2009. www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg90/resources/depression-in-adults-recognition-and-management-pdf-975742638037.
- 3 Wise J. NICE guidance on depression: 35 health organisations demand "full and proper" revision. *BMJ* 2019;365:l2356. 10.1136/bmj.l2356 31138537
- 4 Davies J, Read J, Hengartner MP, et al. Clinical guidelines on antidepressant withdrawal urgently need updating. *BMJ* 2019;365:l2238. 10.1136/bmj.l2238 31109968
- 5 Mahase E. Antidepressant withdrawal guidance must be updated to reflect evidence. *BMJ* 2019;365:l2283. 10.1136/bmj.l2283 31113770
- 6 NICE. Project information: depression in adults: treatment. www.nice.org.uk/guidance/indevelopment/gid-cgwave0725.
- 7 National Survivor User Network. Draft NICE guideline "Recognition and management of depression in adults" not fit for purpose. 2017. www.nsun.org.uk/news/draft-nice-guideline-recognition-and-management-of-depression-in-adults-not-fit-for-purpose.

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