Tricyclic antidepressant drugs for the treatment of pain:

Amitriptyline
Dosulepin
Imipramine
Nortriptyline
Information for patients
Introduction

This leaflet will give you a better understanding of Tricyclic antidepressant tablets. It will tell you how they can help pain and how they should be taken. It will also explain the common side effects to look out for.

What are Tricyclic antidepressant drugs?

This is a group of drugs normally used to treat depression which have also been found useful in treating pain. This is particularly so where there is nerve irritation or damage which may produce pain that is burning or shooting in nature. They have also been found to improve sleep and aid relaxation.

Although you may feel low in mood due to pain, these drugs have not been recommended to treat depression. They are usually prescribed at a lower dose for the treatment of pain.

How can Tricyclic antidepressant drugs help me?

It is hoped that Tricyclic antidepressants can help you by:

• reducing pain
• improving sleep
• reducing muscle spasm and aiding relaxation
• helping you cope with the pain.

How and when should I take them?

Your doctor will usually start you on a low dose and then ask you to gradually increase it until you find the dose that works best for you. It is very important that you follow the instructions on your prescription.

Tricyclic antidepressants are usually taken as a single dose in the evening. Begin by taking it 1-2 hours before bedtime as it can take an hour or two to start working. You may need to take it earlier in the evening if you feel drowsy or ‘hungover’ in the morning or if you are planning to drive early the next morning. You can take it as early as 6pm if necessary. Even if you only take one dose in the evening it can help with your pain during the day, as well as improving your sleep at night.
What are the side effects?

Tricyclic antidepressants can cause unpleasant side effects. These may be worse in the first few days while your body is getting used to them. The most common are:

- Dry mouth
- Constipation
- Drowsiness
- Fluid retention

Other less common side effects include blurred vision, difficulty in passing urine, sweating, nausea and change in sex drive. You may only experience one, or none at all, but it is important that you are aware of them.

If you find it difficult to cope with any side effects we advise you to speak to your GP. Alternatively you can leave a message for the nurses on the Pain Relief Unit’s advice line – Tel: (01865) 857 107.

Please remember that if you want to stop taking your Tricyclic antidepressant tablets they should not be stopped suddenly but reduced slowly over time. **If you stop taking them suddenly it can cause some unwanted side effects.** It may be worth trying an alternative as there are several Tricyclic antidepressants in the same family; another one may work better for you and give you fewer side effects.

How long do I have to take them for and what should I do if my pain does not improve?

It can take a few weeks for you to notice the full benefit of the tablets. It is important to continue with them, particularly if you have started on a low dose. Sometimes the doctor will prescribe a gradually increasing dose for you to take over several weeks.

If the tablets help your pain you can continue to take them for as long as you need them.

If you do not notice any improvement in your pain after a few weeks then we suggest you speak to your GP or leave a message for the nurses on the Pain Relief Unit’s advice line.

Will Tricyclic antidepressants affect my other medicines?

When your GP or Pain Consultant prescribes a Tricyclic antidepressant for you they will take into account your medical history and the other
tablets you may be taking. It is important to remember to tell the doctor about any over-the-counter medicines or herbal remedies you may be taking as some of these may have an affect on prescription medicines.

Can I drink alcohol while taking Tricyclic antidepressant drugs?

The labelling on the drug package will advise you to avoid alcohol. This is because taking them together can make you more drowsy than usual. It is important to be aware of this particularly if you are planning to drive the next day. Once you are familiar with the tablets you may find you are able to have an alcoholic drink without experiencing increased drowsiness.

Pregnancy

If you are a woman planning a pregnancy it is important to speak to your GP before starting a Tricyclic. If you think you may have become pregnant while taking a Tricyclic you should speak to your GP as soon as possible.

Useful telephone numbers

Pain Relief Unit – Nurse Advice
Voicemail: 01865 857 107
or
Email: painrelieftteam.ouh@nhs.net

Please note:
For appointment queries contact 01865 572 079

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call 01865 221473 or email PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk

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