

Medication Information for Youth

Sertraline—Zoloft

What the Medicine Is Called and What It Is For

The name of your medicine may be confusing. Most drugs have two names: 1) a scientific name that we call a *generic name* and 2) a trade or *brand name*. The generic name of this medicine is sertraline. The brand name is Zoloft.

Sertraline is called an *antidepressant* or *selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor* (SSRI). Sertraline is used to treat depression and anxiety disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic disorder, and separation anxiety disorder. It helps people who feel very sad or depressed, anxious (nervous), or afraid, or who have obsessions (uncomfortable thoughts that won't go away) or compulsions (habits that get in the way of daily life).

How You Take the Medicine

It is very important to take the medicine exactly as the doctor or nurse tells you. Do not skip doses or take extra medicine without asking an adult. If you forget a dose, ask your parent(s) what to do. It is very important that you take all the pills you are supposed to take each day. Your doctor will probably recommend that you take your medicine at the same time each day, which may be with meals or at bedtime.

It may take several weeks before you notice that the medicine is helping. Waiting for the full effect may take even longer. You may feel discouraged and think the medicine is never going to help. You may want to give up and stop taking the medicine. Talk to your doctor and parent(s) about how you feel, but **do not stop** taking the medicine unless your doctor tells you to. It is also important not to take extra pills, hoping that you will feel better faster. Doing that could make you very sick.

Caffeine (in coffee, tea, or soft drinks) may make you feel worse.

This medicine is prescribed only for you. It should never be shared with anyone else.

You do not have to tell others that you are taking this medicine, but it is not something you should feel ashamed or embarrassed about. Many young people are helped by sertraline. This medicine is not habit-forming, and you cannot become “hooked” on it. You should talk to your doctor or nurse about any questions you have about the medicine. It is important to remember that the medicine *helps* you. It cannot *make* you do anything or change you as a person.

How Your Doctor Will Follow Your Progress

Before giving you the medicine, your doctor or nurse will talk with you and your parent(s) and may measure your height, weight, heart rate (pulse), and blood pressure. The doctor may order some blood or urine tests to be sure you are in good health.

Be sure to tell your doctor or nurse about any other medicines or supplements you are taking, including vitamins, herbs, or aids to weight loss or bodybuilding. Also be sure to tell the doctor or nurse if you are using alcohol or drugs. Because many medicines may affect babies, it is very important to tell the doctor if you might be pregnant or if you are at risk of becoming pregnant. Be sure to tell the doctor if you have had thoughts of hurting yourself, have tried to hurt yourself, or sometimes wish that you were not alive.

Your teachers may be asked to fill out a form about your grades and behavior in school. A psychologist may give you some tests to see how you learn best.

Before starting the medicine and afterward, the doctor may ask you to answer questions on paper about depression and anxiety.

Most doctors have regular appointments with young people who are taking medicine. You should use these visits to share any concerns you may have about your medicine and to talk about if it has helped you. From time to time, your physician or nurse may measure your height, weight, heart rate (pulse), and blood pressure to be sure that you are in good health while you are taking the medicine. Your doctor also will ask for regular reports from your parents and maybe from your teachers (with your permission) to see how well the medicine is working.

Some medicines are started at the amount you will take for as long as you are taking that medicine. Other medicines need to be increased or adjusted until your doctor decides you are taking the right amount. Starting at a low dose and increasing it slowly may lessen side effects. If the medicine helps you, your doctor will probably want you to take it for 6 months to a year if you are taking it to treat depression. If you are taking it for another problem, your doctor will decide how long you will need to take the medicine as he or she watches your progress.

It is not dangerous to stop sertraline suddenly, but there might be uncomfortable feelings, such as trouble sleeping, nervousness, irritability, or feeling sick. It is better to decrease it slowly. Do not stop taking a medicine unless the doctor tells you to. If you have any problems after stopping or decreasing this medicine, tell your parent(s) or doctor.

How the Medicine Might Affect You

In addition to the ways the medicine can help you, it may have other effects called *side effects*. Different medicines have different side effects. It is helpful to know about some of the most common side effects of your medicine so that you will understand what they are if they happen. Some people do not have any side effects. Some side effects are just uncomfortable, but others may mean a more serious problem with the medicine. Side effects are most common after starting the medicine or after a dose increase. They may go away with time, or the medicine can be adjusted or changed—ask the doctor.

You could have an allergy to any medicine, which might show up as a rash on your skin, swelling, itching, or trouble breathing.

Please tell your parent(s) and your doctor or nurse about any changes that you notice after taking the medicine. It is especially important to tell a responsible adult if you are feeling depressed or that you may not want to live; if you have thoughts of hurting yourself; or if you begin to feel more irritable, nervous, or restless. Also be sure to tell your parent(s) or doctor if you begin to feel “speeded up” or have trouble sleeping.

Some medicines make people feel sleepy or less coordinated. If this medicine is making you sleepy, it is very important not to drive a car or ride a bicycle or motorcycle. After starting a new medicine or increasing the dose of a medicine, please be extra careful when driving a car, riding a bike, or using machines until you can tell how the medicine affects your alertness, attention, and coordination.

One of the most common side effects of this medicine is feeling tired or sleepy during the day, even if you have had a full night’s sleep. After you have been taking the medicine for a few weeks, your body will adjust, and this side effect may go away. If you have had trouble sleeping at night, the medicine can help you sleep better, especially if the doctor tells you to take a dose of medicine in the evening. Other people may feel more restless and excited. Tell your parent(s) or doctor if this is uncomfortable. Sometimes after being on the medicine for a while, people do not care as much about school or friends. Changing the dose or the type of medicine can help this.

This medicine may make your mouth dry. You may be more thirsty than usual and find that you are drinking more water or other liquids. Sucking on sugar-free hard candy or cough drops usually helps. You also could try chewing sugar-free gum or sucking on ice chips. Do not chew the ice; you could hurt your teeth. Also, using lip balm will keep your lips from cracking. It is important to be especially good about brushing your teeth.

Some other side effects that could happen are headache, not feeling hungry and not wanting to eat much, eating more than usual, having an upset stomach, or changes in your bowel movements. You may have a change in your sexual functioning—it is OK to ask the doctor about this. This medicine may make you more likely to get sick if you get overheated, so be sure to drink plenty of liquids and rest in the shade in hot weather.

Please let your parent(s) and doctor know if you notice anything different or unusual about how you feel once you start taking the medicine. This includes good things, such as feeling less sad or less nervous or sleeping better at night.

Notes

Use this space to take notes or to write down questions you want to ask the doctor or nurse.

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From Dulcan MK (editor): *Helping Parents, Youth, and Teachers Understand Medications for Behavioral and Emotional Problems: A Resource Book of Medication Information Handouts*, Third Edition. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Publishing, 2007