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What's the difference between all these medications?

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This is a question I am often asked by my patients. Several times a day we see commercials for prescription pills to treat a variety of diseases from high cholesterol to heart disease and treatment for mental illness is no different. Today I would like to talk about one of the most common mental illnesses, Depression and its treatment.



Depression affects roughly 15 million Americans adults, and it is an illness that can be readily treated with antidepressant medications, talk therapy or a combination of medication and talk therapy. Antidepressants have been around for decades and include several classes of medications that work on different chemicals in the brain, but today the first line treatment for depression are medications called, SSRI's or Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. For the most part medications in this class are very similar; they work by increasing the amount of serotonin between nerve cells which is thought to play a role in depression. Unlike a pain pill that works right away, antidepressants can take up to 4 to 6 weeks to have an affect.

Which SSRI a doctor chooses will depend on each individual patient. Just like every other medication, antidepressants can have side effects and interact with the body or other medications in a way that may be dangerous or uncomfortable for patients. Some SSRI's may be more likely to make a person tired or sedated, while others may have a tendency to give a patient more energy. Depending on an individual's depressive symptoms, your doctor might prescribe a medicine that would be more likely to help you fall asleep or feel more alert and energetic. Furthermore, certain SSRI's have

been studied more in patients with a particular medical disease, like heart disease for instance and this might leave a physician to try a medication that has research data to show that the medication is safe for their patient. Certainly, some medications work better in some patients than others, and after a period of 4-6 weeks of adequate dosages if no improvement in symptoms occurs your doctor will likely recommend increasing your dose or switching to another antidepressant to treat your depression. In some instances a physician might recommend augmenting your medication by adding another medication that works in a different way to treat your Depression.

Even if the first anti-depressant doesn't seem to work for you, there are still other options for treatment. Newer medications that work on norepinephrine and dopamine in the brain are also used quite frequently to treat depression, and older medications to treat depression, although they often have more side effects are still effective in treating depression and can be used in refractory cases.

As a patient it is important for your prescribing doctor to know about your symptoms, side effects, and other medical history and current medications that you are taking. And, as always if you have any questions about the medications you are being prescribed don't hesitate to ask your doctor about your concerns.