Antidepressants are effective for depressed patients in primary care

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THE PROBLEM: Are antidepressant medications effective for treating depression in primary care?

THE SITUATION: Depression is very common in primary care, with a 12-month prevalence of 18.1% (including dysthymia 0.8%). There is considerable overlap with anxiety and substance use (MaGPIe; 2003). Depression is also common in the community, with a 12-month prevalence of 7.1% (Oakley-Browne; 2006).

CLINICAL BOTTOM LINE: Both tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) and Selective Serotonin Receptor Inhibitors (SSRIs) are effective for depression treated in primary care. The numbers needed to treat (NNT) for TCAs ranged from 7 to 16 (median NNT 9) and for SSRIs from 7 to 8 (median NNT 7). The placebo rate ranges from 26% to 63% so most of the benefit seen clinically is through the placebo effect. A minority of patients get a chemical benefit from their medication.

Depression in primary care

Success Evidence Harms
Antidepressants for depression NNT for Effective for NNT for
in primary care TCAs = 9 depression SSRIs = 7
and for

NNT = numbers needed to treat for one person to get an improvement
NNH = numbers needed to treat for one person to get an adverse effect

References

All people residing in New Zealand have access to the Cochrane Library via the Ministry website www.moh.govt.nz/cochranelibrary