

Amitriptyline

Elavil • tablets: 10–150 mg in six strengths

An older antidepressant also used for some pain conditions. The dose and safety plan depend on the reason for treatment.

From Jeffrey Panko, PMHNP-BC's education collection ·

Draft for review · Clinical content has not been revalidated for this website.

TAKE ONLY AS PRESCRIBED

OVERDOSE CAN BE FATAL • STORE SECURELY

Your prescription sets the dose and timing. Do not move divided doses to bedtime or increase them yourself.

What it is used for

Treats depression in adults. Lower doses are also used off-label for nerve pain, headache prevention, fibromyalgia or selected IBS symptoms.

A low pain dose may not treat depression. Feeling sleepy is not the same as improvement in mood.

How it works

It changes serotonin and norepinephrine signaling involved in mood and pain pathways.

Other actions contribute to dry mouth, constipation, sleepiness, dizziness and cardiac risk—not just useful effects.

What to expect over time

EARLY DAYS

Sleepiness, dry mouth or dizziness may appear before benefit. Report troublesome effects; do not simply push through them.

OVER SEVERAL WEEKS

Pain and mood responses vary. Keep follow-up appointments and agreed symptom targets; do not wait if mood worsens.

ONGOING REVIEW

Review benefit, function, side effects and the amount of medicine kept at home. Make stopping a planned decision.

Taking your medication

Take exactly as prescribed, with or without food. Some regimens are taken at bedtime; others use divided doses. Do not combine them yourself.

Your clinician usually starts low and increases gradually. Pain doses are often lower than depression doses; tablet strength is not your daily dose.

Avoid alcohol. Do not drive until you know your response. Rise slowly, use sun protection and ask for a taper before stopping.

When to get help

Any suspected overdose: get emergency advice immediately, even without symptoms. Call Poison Help: 1-800-222-1222. Do not induce vomiting.

Get urgent care: fainting, irregular heartbeat, fever with confusion or muscle stiffness, severe belly pain, inability to urinate, or painful eye/vision changes.

Call 911: collapse, seizure, breathing trouble, inability to wake or immediate self-harm danger. Report suicidal thoughts, worsening mood or marked activation promptly.

Early side effects

Dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, sleepiness and dizziness on standing are common. Sugar-free gum, dental care, suitable fluids, fiber and activity may help; persistent constipation needs treatment.

Other effects to discuss

Discuss weight, sexual effects, sweating, memory changes or falls. Feeling too groggy or unlike yourself deserves review; do not change the dose on your own.

What to keep track of

Review mood, pulse, blood pressure, weight, bowel/bladder function and falls. ECGs and blood tests depend on risk, symptoms and interactions; a normal ECG does not eliminate future risk.

Before you start

Discuss heart disease or fainting, recent heart attack, bipolar disorder, seizures, glaucoma, urinary difficulty, severe constipation, liver disease and overdose risk. Older adults may do better with an alternative. Tell your surgical or dental team before anesthesia. Discuss pregnancy and breastfeeding in advance; infant sedation and feeding problems need attention. Elavil is a former US brand. It is not FDA-approved for children.

Medicines & interactions

MAOIs and serotonin-raising drugs

MAOIs require a prescriber-directed washout, usually at least 14 days; timing depends on the medicines. Linezolid or IV methylene blue need coordinated care. Check tramadol, triptans, other antidepressants and St. John's wort.

Medicines that raise levels or affect the heart

Fluoxetine, paroxetine, bupropion and several other drugs can raise levels. Fluoxetine may require a longer gap before starting. Review heart-rhythm medicines, antibiotics, methadone, thyroid and blood-pressure medicines.

Alcohol and OTC sleep/cold products

Avoid alcohol and check sedatives, diphenhydramine, other antihistamines, cold remedies and supplements. Combinations can worsen sedation, confusion, constipation, urinary problems or cardiac risk.

Everyday tips

Agree on the target: mood, pain, headaches or bowel symptoms. Track function as well as symptom scores.

Keep the follow-up plan, especially after starting or changing a dose; monitor mood at every age, with added vigilance through age 24.

Tell your clinician about constipation or sexual effects early. Practical changes may help.

Discuss limited dispensing and secure storage if overdose risk is present. These reduce access; they cannot make an overdose safe.

Your questions, answered

What if I miss a dose?

Take it when remembered unless the next dose is near; then skip it. Never double. For a missed bedtime dose, ask if taking it late could impair you the next day. Check before restarting after several missed days.

Why a small supply or a heart tracing?

They are safety measures, not a judgment. Amitriptyline can affect heart conduction and is dangerous in overdose. ECGs are based on age, history and other risks—not one universal age cutoff.

Can I stop once I feel better?

Do not stop abruptly. A personal taper over weeks or longer can reduce nausea, cramps, sweating, vivid dreams and insomnia. It does not guarantee that withdrawal or symptoms will never return.

Will I need a blood level?

Sometimes, for interactions, unusual effects or lack of benefit. Timing matters. A level within the reference range does not rule out toxicity or replace emergency overdose assessment.

Storage & safety

Keep the labeled container secured from children and pets, away from excess heat and moisture. Never share tablets. Ask your pharmacy about take-back disposal of unused medicine.

About this information

For general information only; not a substitute for individualized medical advice. This sheet does not cover every risk or interaction. Ask your prescriber or pharmacist before changing how you take this medication.

Sources

1. <https://dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/fda/fdaDrugXsl.cfm?setid=8b10ac1a-cf66-4efa-9abc-498b2f8a1613&type=display>
 2. <https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682388.html>
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Educational inclusion does not mean this medication or its indications are treated at this practice. Review the guide for your exact product with your prescriber or pharmacist.

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