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The truth about antidepressants

The FDA has reported on 228 trials of antidepressants versus placebo that were submitted compulsorily to them (thus avoiding publication bias).¹ Response to both placebo and active medication increased with the severity of depression, with the difference between medication and placebo being largest with the most severe depression.

In a JAMA review, the number needed to treat reported for patients with severe depression was 4, 11 for moderate and 16 for mild depression.² The NNT of 16 means that for every 100 patients given antidepressants, 40 will improve with placebo alone, 6 improve from the medication, and 54 will not improve. Even in severe depression, more patients respond to the placebo, about 40%, than to medication at 25%.³

Many patients with depression, even severe depression, will improve in a few weeks; so talk first and prescribe later, unless strong contextual reasons prevail.⁴

References:

1. [W39: Components and Trends in Treatment Effects in Randomized Placebo-controlled Trials in Major Depressive Disorder from 1979-2016](#). American Society of Clinical Psychopharmacology (2018)
2. [Antidepressant Drug Effects and Depression Severity: a Patient-level Meta-analysis](#). JAMA (2010)
3. [Antidepressants for treatment of depression in primary care: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). J Primary Health Care (2016)
4. [An evidence-based first consultation for depression: nine key messages](#). Br J Gen Pract (2018)

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