Therapeutics

Review: continuing treatment with antidepressants reduces the rate of relapse or recurrence of depressive symptoms regardless of duration of treatment before or after randomisation


QUESTION: In patients with depressive disorders who had previously responded to acute antidepressant therapy, does continuation of antidepressant therapy reduce the risk of relapse or recurrence of depressive symptoms more than placebo?

Data sources

Studies were identified by searching Medline (1966 to April 2000); CINAHL (1982 to April 2000); EMBASE (1980 to April 2000); the Cochrane Collaboration depression, anxiety, and neurosis controlled trials register (CCDANCTR); PsycLIT (1974 to April 2000); PsynDEX (1977 to December 1999); Lilacs (1982 to December 1999); and contact with authors, experts in the field, and drug companies that manufacture antidepressants.

Study selection

Studies were selected if they were randomised controlled trials (RCTs); allocated patients to continue or discontinue treatment; followed up patients for >1 month; and included patients with depressive disorders who had either responded to treatment for an acute episode, or remained free from depressive illness for a period on antidepressants following initial response to treatment.

Data extraction

Data were extracted by 2 reviewers on patient characteristics, intervention details, and outcome measures. A third reviewer checked the data, and relapse or recurrence was counted according to the original authors' definitions. Trials were classified according to duration of treatment before randomisation (1–2 mo, 4–6 mo, or >12 mo), and grouped by duration of randomised treatment (6, 12, or 18–36 mo).

Main results

31 RCTs (4410 patients) met the selection criteria. Follow up ranged from 6–36 months. Fewer patients taking antidepressants had relapses of depressive symptoms than did those taking placebo (table), an effect that persisted for up to 36 months. In 6 studies that had data on the number of patients relapsing at ≥1 year, fewer patients in the antidepressant groups had first recurrences of depressive symptoms regardless of the duration of treatment (table). However, more patients in the antidepressant groups withdrew from the study than did those in the placebo groups (18% v 15%, p=0.009).

Conclusion

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