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Amitriptyline, Nortriptyline, and Desipramine: What you need to know

Amitriptyline, Nortriptyline, and Desipramine are frequently administered for neuropathic pain. In patients with functional abdominal pain, visceral hyperalgesia, cyclic vomiting, and irritable bowel syndrome, these medications can reduce or eliminate abdominal pain/vomiting in the majority of patients. They are thought to work by decreasing the pain nerve sensations.

Although these medications are labeled “tricyclic antidepressants,” your GI doctor is not using them for depression. Generally, the dose of amitriptyline/nortriptyline/desipramine used for gastrointestinal problems is a fraction of the dose that is used when a person is using the medication for depression. Therefore, serious side effects are uncommon; in fact, at low doses, these medications are very unlikely to affect mood or depression. If you think your child is depressed, please let your GI doctor know so that your child will be treated properly. Common side effects of these medicines include drowsiness (the medicine is often given before bedtime). Occasional side effects include decreased urination, constipation, and dry mouth. It is routine practice to obtain an EKG at the start of these medications as children with underlying heart arrhythmias may not receive these medications.

Recently, the FDA announced that all antidepressant drugs must now carry so-called “black-box” warnings, alerting doctors and consumers that the antidepressants can increase suicidal behavior in children with depression and that the risk of using antidepressants must be carefully balanced with the need.

Family members should contact their child’s physician if the patient:

- expresses thoughts of wanting to die, or engages in self-destructive behavior
- shows signs of increased anxiety/panic, agitation, aggressiveness, or impulsivity

Adverse reactions to antidepressant medication are most likely to occur early in the course of treatment. It may be appropriate to adjust the dosage, change to a different medication, or stop using medication.

It is important to consult with your physician before changing or terminating your child's antidepressant treatment.

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