

Nortriptyline (pron. nor-trip-tea-lean)

What is nortriptyline used for?

Nortriptyline (also known as Allegron[®] or Aventyl[®]) is one of a group of medicines called the tricyclics. It is mainly used to help treat the symptoms of depression. It can also be used for insomnia (in low dose), plus neuropathic pain (caused by nerve damage) and bed-wetting in children. Nortriptyline is made as tablets.

What is the usual dose of nortriptyline?

The usual dose of nortriptyline should be around 125-150mg a day for depression.

How should I take nortriptyline?

Swallow the tablets with at least half a glass of water whilst sitting or standing. This is to make sure that they reach the stomach and do not stick in your throat.

When should I take nortriptyline?

Take your medication as directed on the medicine label. Try to take it at regular times each day. Taking it at mealtimes may make it easier for you to remember as there is no problem about taking it with or after food. If the label says to take it once a day this is usually best at bedtime as it may make you drowsy at first.

What are the alternatives to nortriptyline?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. There are many other medicines (SSRIs, venlafaxine, mirtazapine), talking therapies and treatments for depression and other symptoms. See our "Handy charts" to help you compare the medicines, how they work and their side effects.

How long will nortriptyline take to work?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. For depression, the effect will start in a week or two, and carry on building for the next few weeks. Please look at one of the "Handy charts" for more advice.

How long will I need to keep taking nortriptyline for?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. Please look at the "Handy charts" for more help and advice.

Is nortriptyline addictive?

Nortriptyline is not addictive as such, but if you stop it suddenly you may get some discontinuation effects. At worst, these could include headache, restlessness, diarrhoea, nausea, 'flu-like symptoms, tiredness, stomach cramps, sleep disturbance and mild movement disorders. They can start shortly after stopping or reducing doses, are usually short lived, will go if nortriptyline is started again and can even occur with missed doses.

Can I stop taking nortriptyline suddenly?

It is unwise to stop taking it suddenly, even if you feel better. Your symptoms can return if treatment is stopped too early. This may occur some weeks or even many months after the medicine has been stopped. When the time comes, you should withdraw nortriptyline by a gradual reduction in the dose taken over a period of several weeks. You should discuss this fully with your doctor.

What should I do if I forget to take a dose of nortriptyline?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember unless it is within about 12 hours of your next dose. If you remember after this just take the next dose as normal. Do not try to catch up by taking two doses at once as you may get more side-effects. If you have problems remembering your doses (as very many people do) ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse about this. There are some special packs that can be used to help you remember.

Can I drink alcohol while I am taking nortriptyline?

If you drink alcohol while nortriptyline it may make you feel more sleepy. This is particularly important if you need to drive or operate machinery and you must seek advice on this.

Will nortriptyline affect my other medication?

Nortriptyline has several interactions with other medicines:

- The effects of nortriptyline can be increased by some antipsychotics, some heart drugs and SSRIs
- If nortriptyline is taken with benzodiazepines (e.g. diazepam) or alcohol, it will cause more sleepiness
- There can be problems if taken with other antidepressants e.g. SSRIs (inc. fluoxetine), venlafaxine etc.
- You should have no problems with "The Contraceptive Pill" and nortriptyline.

Not all of these interactions happen in everyone. Some of these medicines can still be used together but you will need to follow your doctor's instructions carefully. There are many other possible drug interactions.

What sort of side-effects might occur if I am taking nortriptyline?

The table below will show you some of the main side effects you might get from nortriptyline.

Side effect	What happens	What to do about it
COMMON (more than about 1 in 10 people might get these)		
Sleepiness	Feeling sleepy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your nortriptyline at a different time.
Constipation	When you want to poop but can't (the opposite of diarrhoea). You can't pass a motion.	Make sure you eat enough fibre, cereal or fruit. Make sure you are drinking enough fluid, keep active and get some exercise e.g. walking. If this does not help, ask your doctor or pharmacist for a mild laxative.
Dry mouth	Not much saliva or spit.	Suck sugar-free gum or boiled sweets. If it is bad, your doctor may be able to give you a mouth spray.
Blurred vision	Things look fuzzy and you can't focus your eyes properly.	Do not drive with blurred vision. This should wear off after a few weeks. If it does not wear off, see your doctor if you are worried.
Weight gain	A bigger appetite and putting on weight.	A diet full of vegetables and fibre may help prevent weight gain.
UNCOMMON (less than about 1 in 10 people might get these)		
Nausea	Feeling sick.	Take each dose with or after food. If it is bad, contact your doctor.
Headache	Your head is pounding and painful.	Try paracetamol. Your pharmacist will be able to advise if this is safe to take with any other medicines you may be taking.
Urinary retention	Not much urine passed. Feeling like you have a full bladder all the time.	Contact your doctor now.
Postural hypotension	A low blood pressure - this can make you feel dizzy when you stand up.	Try not to stand up too quickly. If you feel dizzy, don't drive.
Palpitations	A fast heart beat.	It is not usually dangerous. It can easily be treated if it lasts a long time. Tell your doctor about it.
Sexual dysfunction	Finding it hard to have an orgasm. No desire for sex.	Discuss with your doctor.
RARE (less than about 1 in 100 people might get these)		
Tremor	Feeling shaky.	Contact your doctor now.
Skin rashes	Blotches seen on the skin.	Stop taking and contact your doctor now

Do not be worried by this list of side effects. Some people get no side effects at all and others may get some effects that are not listed in this table. If you think you might have a side effect to your medicine, you should ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. If you want to know more, go to our website for links to other websites with more information.

Will I need a blood test if I am taking nortriptyline?

You should not usually need any blood tests unless you are taking a high dose.

Can I drive or cycle while I am taking nortriptyline?

Nortriptyline can affect your driving in two ways. Firstly, you may feel sleepy and/or get blurred vision at first when taking nortriptyline. Secondly, it can slow down your reactions or reflexes, even though you may feel well. This is especially true if you also have a dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation etc. (the so-called "anticholinergic side effects"). Until these wear off, or you know how nortriptyline affects you, do not drive or operate machinery.

The small print: This leaflet is to help you understand about your medicine. You should also read the manufacturer's Patient Information Leaflet (PIL). You may find lots more on the internet but beware as internet-based information is not always accurate. Do not share medicines with anyone else. Go to our website for fuller answers to these and many other questions e.g. driving, women's health, how it works, doses and interactions, and about the conditions. The "Handy charts" will help you compare the main medicines for each condition, how they work and their side effects.