PROTRIPTYLINE

Therapeutics

Brands • Triptil • Vivactil

see index for additional brand names

Generic? Yes

Class
- Neuroscience-based Nomenclature: serotonin, norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor
- Tricyclic antidepressant (TCA)
- Predominantly a norepinephrine/noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor

Commonly Prescribed for
(bold for FDA approved)
- Mental depression
- Treatment-resistant depression

How the Drug Works
- Boosts neurotransmitter norepinephrine/noradrenaline
- Blocks norepinephrine reuptake pump (norepinephrine transporter), presumably increasing noradrenergic neurotransmission
- Since dopamine is inactivated by norepinephrine reuptake in frontal cortex, which largely lacks dopamine transporters, protriptyline can increase dopamine neurotransmission in this part of the brain
- A more potent inhibitor of norepinephrine reuptake pump than serotonin reuptake pump (serotonin transporter)
- At high doses may also boost neurotransmitter serotonin and presumably increase serotonergic neurotransmission

How Long Until It Works
★ Some evidence it may have an early onset of action with improvement in activity and energy as early as 1 week
- Onset of therapeutic actions usually not immediate, but often delayed 2 to 4 weeks
- If it is not working within 6 to 8 weeks for depression, it may require a dosage increase or it may not work at all
- May continue to work for many years to prevent relapse of symptoms

If It Works
- The goal of treatment is complete remission of current symptoms as well as prevention of future relapses
- Treatment most often reduces or even eliminates symptoms, but not a cure since symptoms can recur after medicine stopped
- Continue treatment until all symptoms are gone (remission)
- Once symptoms gone, continue treating for 1 year for the first episode of depression
- For second and subsequent episodes of depression, treatment may need to be indefinite
- Use in anxiety disorders may also need to be indefinite

If It Doesn’t Work
- Many patients have only a partial response where some symptoms are improved but others persist (especially insomnia, fatigue, and problems concentrating)
- Other patients may be nonresponders, sometimes called treatment-resistant or treatment-refractory
- Consider increasing dose, switching to another agent or adding an appropriate augmenting agent
- Consider psychotherapy
- Consider evaluation for another diagnosis or for a comorbid condition (e.g., medical illness, substance abuse, etc.)
- Some patients may experience apparent lack of consistent efficacy due to activation of latent or underlying bipolar disorder, and require antidepressant discontinuation and a switch to a mood stabilizer

Best Augmenting Combos for Partial Response or Treatment Resistance
- Lithium, buspirone, thyroid hormone

Tests
- Baseline ECG is recommended for patients over age 50
★ Since tricyclic and tetracyclic antidepressants are frequently associated with weight gain, before starting treatment, weigh all patients and determine if the patient is already overweight (BMI 25.0–29.9) or obese (BMI ≥30)
- Before giving a drug that can cause weight gain to an overweight or obese
patient, consider determining whether the patient already has pre-diabetes (fasting plasma glucose 100–125 mg/dL), diabetes (fasting plasma glucose >126 mg/dL), or dyslipidemia (increased total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, and triglycerides; decreased HDL cholesterol), and treat or refer such patients for treatment, including nutrition and weight management, physical activity counseling, smoking cessation, and medical management

* Monitor weight and BMI during treatment
* While giving a drug to a patient who has gained >5% of initial weight, consider evaluating for the presence of pre-diabetes, diabetes, or dyslipidemia, or consider switching to a different antidepressant

• EKGs may be useful for selected patients (e.g., those with personal or family history of QTc prolongation; cardiac arrhythmia; recent myocardial infarction; uncompensated heart failure; or taking agents that prolong QTc interval such as pimozide, thioridazine, selected antiarrhythmics, moxifloxacin, sparfloxacin, etc.)
• Patients at risk for electrolyte disturbances (e.g., patients on diuretic therapy) should have baseline and periodic serum potassium and magnesium measurements

**SIDE EFFECTS**

**How Drug Causes Side Effects**

* Anticholinergic activity for protriptyline may be more potent than for some other TCAs and may explain sedative effects, dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, tachycardia, and hypotension

• Sedative effects and weight gain may be due to antihistamine properties

• Blockade of alpha 1 adrenergic receptors may explain dizziness, sedation, and hypotension

• Cardiac arrhythmias, especially in overdose, may be caused by blockade of ion channels

**Notable Side Effects**

• Blurred vision, constipation, urinary retention, increased appetite, dry mouth, nausea, diarrhea, heartburn, unusual taste in mouth, weight gain

• Fatigue, weakness, dizziness, sedation, headache, anxiety, nervousness, restlessness

• Sexual dysfunction (impotence, change in libido)

• Sweating, rash, itching

**Life-Threatening or Dangerous Side Effects**

• Paralytic ileus, hyperthermia (TCAs + anticholinergic agents)

• Lowered seizure threshold and rare seizures

• Orthostatic hypotension, sudden death, arrhythmias, tachycardia

• QTc prolongation

• Hepatic failure, extrapyramidal symptoms

• Increased intraocular pressure

• Rare induction of mania

• Rare activation of suicidal ideation and behavior (suicidality) (short-term studies did not show an increase in the risk of suicidality with antidepressants compared to placebo beyond age 24)

**Weight Gain**

• Many experience and/or can be significant in amount

• Can increase appetite and carbohydrate craving

**Sedation**

• Many experience and/or can be significant in amount

* Not as sedating as other TCAs; more likely to be activating than other TCAs

**What to Do About Side Effects**

• Wait

• Wait

• Lower the dose

• Switch to an SSRI or newer antidepressant

**Best Augmenting Agents for Side Effects**

• Trazodone or a hypnotic for insomnia

• Benzodiazepines for agitation and anxiety

• Many side effects cannot be improved with an augmenting agent
DOSING AND USE

Usual Dosage Range
• 15–40 mg/day in 3–4 divided doses

Dosage Forms
• Tablets 5 mg, 10 mg

How to Dose
• Initial 15 mg/day in divided doses; increase morning dose as needed; maximum dose 60 mg/day

Dosing Tips
★ Be aware that among this class of agents (tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants), protriptyline has uniquely low dosing (15–40 mg/day for protriptyline compared to 75–300 mg/day for most other tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants)
★ Be aware that among this class of agents (tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants), protriptyline has uniquely frequent dosing (3–4 times a day compared to once daily for most other tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants)
• If intolerable anxiety, insomnia, agitation, akathisia, or activation occur either upon dosing initiation or discontinuation, consider the possibility of activated bipolar disorder, and switch to a mood stabilizer or an atypical antipsychotic

Overdose
• Death may occur; CNS depression, convulsions, cardiac dysrhythmias, severe hypotension, EKG changes, coma

Long-Term Use
• Safe

Habit Forming
• No

How to Stop
• Taper to avoid withdrawal effects
• Even with gradual dose reduction some withdrawal symptoms may appear within the first 2 weeks
• Many patients tolerate 50% dose reduction for 3 days, then another 50% reduction for 3 days, then discontinuation
• If withdrawal symptoms emerge during discontinuation, raise dose to stop

Pharmacokinetics
• Substrate for CYP450 2D6
• Half-life approximately 74 hours

Drug Interactions
• Tramadol increases the risk of seizures in patients taking TCAs
• Use of TCAs with anticholinergic drugs may result in paralytic ileus or hyperthermia
• Fluoxetine, paroxetine, bupropion, duloxetine, and other 2D6 inhibitors may increase TCA concentrations
• Cimetidine may increase plasma concentrations of TCAs and cause anticholinergic symptoms
• Phenothiazines or haloperidol may raise TCA blood concentrations
• May alter effects of anti hypertensive drugs; may inhibit hypotensive effects of clonidine
• Use with sympathomimetic agents may increase sympathetic activity
• Methylphenidate may inhibit metabolism of TCAs
• Activation and agitation, especially following switching or adding antidepressants, may represent the induction of a bipolar state, especially a mixed dysphoric bipolar II condition sometimes associated with suicidal ideation, and require the addition of lithium, a mood stabilizer or an atypical antipsychotic, and/or discontinuation of protriptyline

Other Warnings/Precautions
• Add or initiate other antidepressants with caution for up to 2 weeks after discontinuing protriptyline
• Generally, do not use with MAOIs, including 14 days after MAOIs are stopped; do not start an MAOI for at least 5 half-lives (5 to 7 days for most drugs) after discontinuing protriptyline
• Use with caution in patients with history of seizures, urinary retention, angle-closure glaucoma, hyperthyroidism
• TCAs can increase QTc interval, especially at toxic doses, which can be attained not
only by overdose but also by combining with drugs that inhibit TCA metabolism via CYP450 2D6, potentially causing torsade de pointes-type arrhythmia or sudden death

- Because TCAs can prolong QTc interval, use with caution in patients who have bradycardia or who are taking drugs that can induce bradycardia (e.g., beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, clonidine, digitalis)

- Because TCAs can prolong QTc interval, use with caution in patients who have hypokalemia and/or hypomagnesemia or who are taking drugs that can induce hypokalemia and/or magnesemia (e.g., diuretics, stimulant laxatives, intravenous amphotericin B, glucocorticoids, tetracosactide)

- When treating children, carefully weigh the risks and benefits of pharmacological treatment against the risks and benefits of nontreatment with antidepressants and make sure to document this in the patient’s chart

- Do Not Use
  - If patient is recovering from myocardial infarction
  - If patient is taking agents capable of significantly prolonging QTc interval (e.g., pimozide, thioridazine, selected antiarrhythmics, moxifloxacin, sparfl oxacin)
  - If there is a history of QTc prolongation or cardiac arrhythmia, recent acute myocardial infarction, uncompensated heart failure
  - If patient is taking drugs that inhibit TCA metabolism, including CYP450 2D6 inhibitors, except by an expert
  - If there is reduced CYP450 2D6 function, such as patients who are poor 2D6 metabolizers, except by an expert and at low doses
  - If there is a proven allergy to protriptyline

Renal Impairment
- Use with caution; may need to lower dose
- Patient may need to be monitored closely

Hepatic Impairment
- Use with caution; may need to lower dose
- Patient may need to be monitored closely

Cardiac Impairment
- Baseline ECG is recommended
- TCAs have been reported to cause arrhythmias, prolongation of conduction time, orthostatic hypotension, sinus tachycardia, and heart failure, especially in the diseased heart
- Myocardial infarction and stroke have been reported with TCAs
- TCAs produce QTc prolongation, which may be enhanced by the existence of bradycardia, hypokalemia, congenital or acquired long QTc interval, which should be evaluated prior to administering protriptyline
- Use with caution if treating concomitantly with a medication likely to produce prolonged bradycardia, hypokalemia, slowing of intracardiac conduction, or prolongation of the QTc interval
- Avoid TCAs in patients with a known history of QTc prolongation, recent acute myocardial infarction, and uncompensated heart failure
- TCAs may cause a sustained increase in heart rate in patients with ischemic heart disease and may worsen (decrease) heart rate variability, an independent risk of mortality in cardiac populations
- Since SSRIs may improve (increase) heart rate variability in patients following a myocardial infarct and may improve survival as well as mood in patients with acute angina or following a myocardial infarction, these are more appropriate agents for cardiac population than tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants

- Risk/benefit ratio may not justify use of TCAs in cardiac impairment

Elderly
- Baseline ECG is recommended for patients over age 50
- May be more sensitive to anticholinergic, cardiovascular, hypotensive, and sedative effects
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**Children and Adolescents**
- Carefully weigh the risks and benefits of pharmacological treatment against the risks and benefits of nontreatment with antidepressants and make sure to document this in the patient's chart.
- Monitor patients face-to-face regularly, particularly during the first several weeks of treatment.
- Use with caution, observing for activation of known or unknown bipolar disorder and/or suicidal ideation, and inform parents or guardians of this risk so they can help observe child or adolescent patients.
- Not recommended for use under age 12.
- Not intended for use under age 6.
- Several studies show lack of efficacy of TCAs for depression.
- Some cases of sudden death have occurred in children taking TCAs.
- Recommended dose: 15–20 mg/day.

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**Pregnancy**
- Effective June 30, 2015, the US FDA requires changes to the content and format of pregnancy and lactation information in prescription drug labels, including the elimination of the pregnancy letter categories; the Pregnancy and Lactation Labeling Rule (PLLR or final rule) applies only to prescription drugs and will be phased in gradually for drugs approved on or after June 30, 2001.
- Controlled studies have not been conducted in pregnant women.
- Crosses the placenta.
- Adverse effects have been reported in infants whose mothers took a TCA (lethargy, withdrawal symptoms, fetal malformations).
- Must weigh the risk of treatment (first trimester fetal development, third trimester newborn delivery) to the child against the risk of no treatment (recurrence of depression, maternal health, infant bonding) to the mother and child.
- For many patients this may mean continuing treatment during pregnancy.

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**Breast Feeding**
- Some drug is found in mother’s breast milk.
  - Recommended either to discontinue drug or bottle feed.
  - Immediate postpartum period is a high-risk time for depression, especially in women who have had prior depressive episodes, so drug may need to be reinstituted late in the third trimester or shortly after childbirth to prevent a recurrence during the postpartum period.
  - Must weigh benefits of breast feeding with risks and benefits of antidepressant treatment versus nontreatment to both the infant and the mother.
  - For many patients this may mean continuing treatment during breast feeding.

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**Potential Advantages**
- Severe or treatment-resistant depression.
- Withdrawn, anergic patients.

**Potential Disadvantages**
- Pediatric, geriatric, and cardiac patients.
- Patients concerned with weight gain.
- Patients noncompliant with 3–4 times daily dosing.

**Primary Target Symptoms**
- Depressed mood.

**Pears**
- TCAs are no longer generally considered a first-line treatment option for depression because of their side effect profile.
- TCAs continue to be useful for severe or treatment-resistant depression.
  - Has some potential advantages for withdrawn, anergic patients.
  - May have a more rapid onset of action than some other TCAs.
  - May aggravate agitation and anxiety more than some other TCAs.
May have more anticholinergic side effects, hypotension, and tachycardia than some other TCAs
- Noradrenergic reuptake inhibitors such as protriptyline can be used as a second-line treatment for smoking cessation, cocaine dependence, and attention deficit disorder
- TCAs may aggravate psychotic symptoms
- Alcohol should be avoided because of additive CNS effects
- Underweight patients may be more susceptible to adverse cardiovascular effects
- Children, patients with inadequate hydration, and patients with cardiac disease may be more susceptible to TCA-induced cardiotoxicity than healthy adults
- For the expert only: a heroic treatment (but potentially dangerous) for severely treatment-resistant patients is to give simultaneously with MAOIs for patients who fail to respond to numerous other antidepressants, but generally recommend a different TCA than protriptyline for this use
- If this option is elected, start the MAOI with the tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressant simultaneously at low doses after appropriate drug washout, then alternately increase doses of these agents every few days to a week as tolerated
- Although very strict dietary and concomitant drug restrictions must be observed to prevent hypertensive crises and serotonin syndrome, the most common side effects of MAOIs and tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressant combinations may be weight gain and orthostatic hypotension
- Patients on TCAs should be aware that they may experience symptoms such as photosensitivity or blue-green urine
- SSRIs may be more effective than TCAs in women, and TCAs may be more effective than SSRIs in men
- Since tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants are substrates for CYP450 2D6, and 7% of the population (especially Caucasians) may have a genetic variant leading to reduced activity of 2D6, such patients may not safely tolerate normal doses of tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressants and may require dose reduction
- Phenotypic testing may be necessary to detect this genetic variant prior to dosing with a tricyclic/tetracyclic antidepressant, especially in vulnerable populations such as children, elderly, cardiac populations, and those on concomitant medications
- Patients who seem to have extraordinarily severe side effects at normal or low doses may have this phenotypic CYP450 2D6 variant and require low doses or switching to another antidepressant not metabolized by 2D6

Suggested Reading

