

# Escitalopram (Cipralex®)

## What is it and why is it prescribed?

- Escitalopram belongs to the family of medicines called **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** and works by increasing the amount of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is a chemical messenger involved in controlling many important bodily functions: sleep; aggression; eating; sexual behaviour; and mood.
- Escitalopram is used to treat a wide range of mental health conditions, including but not limited to: unipolar depression (low mood); generalized anxiety disorder; social anxiety disorder; panic disorder; and obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- The overall goal of escitalopram is to help individuals improve their ability to function and manage their mental health on a daily basis.
  - When treating depression, the goal is to improve the control of low mood, sleep, appetite, energy level as well as interest in daily living activities.
  - When treating anxiety conditions, the goal is to reduce anxiety, fear, unwanted thoughts, and panic attacks (both in terms of frequency and severity).
  - Escitalopram may also reduce the urge to perform tasks repeatedly, such as compulsive hand-washing or counting or checking, that interfere with day-to-day living.

## How should this medication be used?

Escitalopram is available as 5 mg, 10 mg, 15 mg and 20 mg tablets, as well as 10 mg and 20 mg oral disintegrating tablets (ODT) for patients who have trouble swallowing pills. The ODT tablet should be placed on the tongue where it rapidly disintegrates and can be swallowed without water.

Typically, the dose is started as 5 mg or 10 mg once a day with or without food (either in the morning or evening). The dose can be increased gradually based on response and tolerability up to a maximum of 20 mg/day.

## When does escitalopram start to work and how long should it be taken?

- Escitalopram does not start working immediately; it has a delayed onset of response and may take 4 – 8 weeks, or sometimes longer, to achieve the desired response.
- The minimum duration of escitalopram treatment for the first episode of depression is one year. For individuals with risk of depression recurrence such as chronic pain patients, the minimum duration of treatment is two years. For patients with multiple recurrent episodes of depression, treatment may be ongoing for more than two years.
- For long-term escitalopram use for any indication, the dose should be maintained at the lowest effective dose and patients should be periodically assessed to determine the need for continued treatment.

## What special precautions should I follow?

- Before using escitalopram, talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself. When escitalopram is used to treat depression, some of the symptoms of depression can improve faster than others. If you are having thoughts of suicide and starting escitalopram improves your energy level, but those thoughts haven't yet improved/disappeared, you may be at risk of carrying out those thoughts. It is important to talk with your health care providers about these situations so we can put plan in place and support you to ensure your safety.
- Escitalopram can impact the electrical activity of the heart by extending the interval between when the heart contracts and relaxes. This situation is known as QT prolongation and can occur if escitalopram is taken at too high a dose or in combination with other medications that can also cause QT prolongation. This is why the usual recommended adult maximum dose of escitalopram is 20 mg/day. In the elderly, the maximum dose is often limited to 10 mg/day. Sometimes, as part of escitalopram safety monitoring, an electrocardiogram (also known as an ECG) will be done to check the heart rhythm.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist about all of the medications you take (prescription, non-prescription, herbals, over-the-counter products, etc.) so drug interactions can be minimized. This is especially important with escitalopram because we want to avoid the use of too many medications that all work on serotonin.
- Do not take escitalopram with a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) or within 14 days of stopping a MAOI. This includes: antidepressants phenelzine, tranylcypromine, or moclobemide; Parkinson's disease medications selegiline or rasagiline).
- Never stop escitalopram abruptly because doing so will make you feel like you have flu-like symptoms. If you don't want to continue with escitalopram, it is best to slowly wean off the medication in a manner similar to how it was gradually started. Please talk to your prescriber for guidance.

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## What should I do if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it unless it is almost time for the next dose. In this case, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do **NOT** take a double dose to make up for a missed dose

## What side effects can this medication cause?

### Common side effects that often improve after a couple weeks of use:

- Nausea, diarrhea, dry mouth, increased sweating

### Side effects that usually don't decrease over time and should be discussed with the prescriber:

- Sexual side effects (such as problems with low sex drive, orgasm, ejaculation, or erectile dysfunction) can happen with a variety of antidepressant medications, including escitalopram.

### Less common, but serious side effects:

- Low sodium levels in the blood (hyponatremia) which may present with the following symptoms: headache; weakness; and difficulty concentrating and remembering. This condition is more likely to happen in older patients and those taking other medications that can lower the sodium levels (such as diuretics or "water pills").

### Inform your doctor immediately if you notice:

- Symptoms of serotonin syndrome, a condition where there is too much serotonin – typically due to a drug interaction. Symptoms include: shivering; overactive reflexes (twitching/muscle jerks); increased body temperature; changes in blood pressure/heart rate/breathing; agitation/restlessness; sweating.

Your doctor prescribed this therapy because he/she has judged the benefit to you is greater than the risk of side effects. Many people using this therapy do not have serious side effects.

## What storage conditions are needed for this medication?

Keep this medication in the container it came in, tightly closed, and out of reach of children. Store at room temperature, away from excess heat/moisture (not in the kitchen or bathroom).