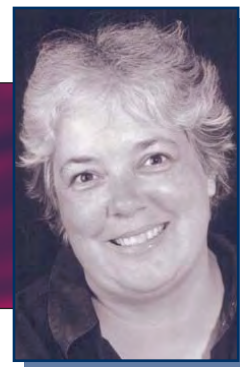


# The Spotter's Guide to Medication - Venlafaxine and Fluvoxamine



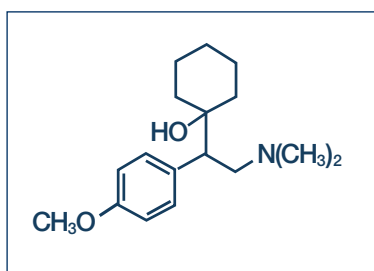
This section is prepared so that it can be photocopied for parents who may wish to know more about medications they or their children have been prescribed.

## Judy Longworth

*Judy Longworth is the clinical pharmacist in The Department of Psychological Medicine at The Children's Hospital at Westmead. As part of her job she provides information to patients and carers as well as other health professionals from all over New South Wales, and beyond, about medications and their effects. She was awarded the 1999 Janssen Cilag SHPA Psychiatry Pharmacy Fellowship. She has been a major contributor to ensuring that psychotropic medications in children are being audited in their usage and evaluated for their benefits and risks at the Children's Hospital at Westmead*

## Venlafaxine

### What is Venlafaxine?



Venlafaxine is the proper name or generic name for Efexor<sup>®</sup> and Efexor<sup>®</sup> XR, a type of antidepressant. This type of antidepressant is a serotonin and noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI). Venlafaxine is the first of this new class of antidepressants. Venlafaxine increases the levels of the brain messengers serotonin and noradrenaline.

*'Venlafaxine increases the levels of the brain messengers serotonin and noradrenaline'*

### What is Venlafaxine used for?

Venlafaxine is usually used when other antidepressants have failed to give an adequate response. Venlafaxine is used primarily as an antidepressant to lift one's mood but also for the long-term treatment of anxiety disorders. It has been used in children for aggressive behaviour and panic disorder. In

years gone by, medication was used as a last resort. We still recommend cognitive behaviour therapy for depression and anxiety as the first line of therapy. However, there is growing evidence that the longer people are depressed the harder it is to treat and that treating depression earlier and more thoroughly can prevent chronic depression from developing in adulthood. We also know that adolescent depression is very resistant to treatment including some drugs, like the tricyclics that work in adulthood. Taking adolescent depression and anxiety seriously means considering the use of medications in the hope that we may prevent some of the young people from committing suicide or turning to self-medication via substance abuse. Those adolescents who reject help and cannot talk about their problems may gain some protection from medications like Venlafaxine rather than resorting to self-injurious behaviour.

### How does Venlafaxine work?

Venlafaxine selectively blocks the action of noradrenaline and serotonin at the synapse of the neuron and to a smaller extent has some action on the dopamine receptors as well. Venlafaxine acts like many tricyclic antidepressants without the effects on the noradrenaline  $\alpha_1$  (effects on the heart), cholinergic (effects on urinary tract and other

body secretions) and histamine (effects on weight and sleep) receptor blocking properties. Although there is some effect from these neurotransmitters, it is not to the same extent as the tricyclics. At the lower doses Venlafaxine acts like an SSRI (similar to sertraline) but at higher doses there is more effect from the noradrenaline reuptake blocking action and at the highest doses the effect of the dopamine blockade is noted.

### Side Effects

As all medicines have side effects, some are serious but often they are not. If any side effect becomes troublesome then this should be reported to the treating doctor.

### More common side effects:

- Nausea and vomiting usually only in the initial stages of therapy
- Drowsiness or tiredness
- Constipation
- Anxiety
- Heartburn or abdominal pains
- Loss of appetite
- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Difficulty sleeping or abnormal dreams
- Sweating or flushing
- Dry mouth Chewing sugarless gum or lollies, sucking bits of ice or using a saliva substitute can produce temporary relief. If the mouth is continually dry for more than 2 weeks then check with your doctor or dentist as this can lead to dental problems.
- **Increased blood pressure is common**
- **Headaches**
- **Withdrawal**

### Less common side effects include:

- Yawning
- Confusion
- Swelling or fluid retention
- Chills
- Muscle or joint pain
- Changes in the way the heart beats
- Low sodium levels in blood

### Before someone takes Venlafaxine

Check with a doctor or pharmacist if there is a likelihood of any other drugs or medicines both from pharmacies and health food stores as there is always the possibility that there could be a drug interaction. Although Venlafaxine is

not registered for use in children under the age of 18, there has been some research and clinical experience about the use.

### Before starting Venlafaxine

Make sure that the doctor knows as much about you or your family member as possible so that the best medication can be prescribed. The doctor may start with the immediate release tablets and once the dose has stabilised then the extended release capsules as a once daily preparation can be used.

*'once the dose has stabilised then the extended release capsules as a once daily preparation can be used'*

The tablets are an immediate release preparation so that the tablets should be taken twice daily. Immediate release tablets are used initially in therapy to stabilise a dose and once the patient is stabilised on a dose then he or she can be switched to the extended release capsules for a once daily preparation. The dose of the medication corresponds to the availability of the extended release capsules.

### How to take it

Venlafaxine is taken with a glass of water or other liquid and food to reduce the nauseous feelings. The extended release capsules should be swallowed whole and not chewed, divided or crushed. If having problems taking the extended release capsules, then it should be discussed with the doctor and returned to immediate release tablets and twice daily dosing.

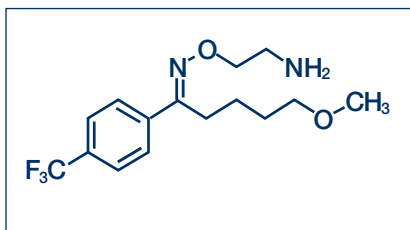
The tablets or extended release capsules, or part thereof should be taken at approximately the same times each day.

### How long to take it

Venlafaxine, like many of the other classes of antidepressants, take 2-6 weeks until a clinical effect is noted. Thus treatment will be at least 3 to 6 months and sometimes longer. We usually suggest treatment for at least two years after the diagnosis of a major depression. Venlafaxine cannot be stopped suddenly so the doses have to be reduced slowly. If for some reason Venlafaxine has to be stopped then it is best to do so after consulting with your doctor. The doctor will discuss the length of treatment with you.

# Fluvoxamine

## What is Fluvoxamine?



Fluvoxamine is marketed under the name Luvox<sup>®</sup> and Faverin<sup>®</sup>. This type of antidepressant is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor or SSRI. It is selective because it targets just those cells in the brain that use a particular chemical (serotonin) to send messages to other parts of the brain. This means that every nerve cell in the brain that uses serotonin as a chemical messenger will have a higher level of the messenger in the space between the nerve cell terminals and receptor sites. The vacuum cleaner (reuptake system) that mops up the chemical messenger when it has been sent to make one of its messages, is turned off. This leaves more chemical messenger about to keep the signals going. Serotonin is a chemical messenger, which acts in the brain to help with feelings of well being and anxiety by controlling mood.

*‘Serotonin is a chemical messenger, which acts in the brain to help with feelings of well being and anxiety by controlling mood’*

Fluvoxamine is also the first of the SSRIs to have medical information and product registration registered in Australia for the use in children 6-12 years for the condition of obsessive compulsive disorder.

## What is Fluvoxamine used for?

Fluvoxamine is used in the treatment of a wide range of disorders including depression and anxiety disorders. Fluvoxamine is used primarily as an antidepressant to lift one's mood but also for the long-term treatment of anxiety disorders. It has been used in children for aggressive behaviour, panic disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. In years gone by medication was used as a last resort. We still recommend cognitive behaviour therapy

for obsessive compulsive disorder, depression and anxiety as the first line of therapy. However, there is growing evidence that the longer people are depressed the harder it is to treat and that treating depression earlier and more thoroughly can prevent chronic depression from developing in adulthood. We also know that adolescent depression is very resistant to treatment including some drugs, like the tricyclics that work in adulthood. Taking adolescent depression and anxiety seriously means considering the use of medications if we are to prevent some of the young people who suicide and turn to self-medication via substance abuse. Those adolescents who are help rejecting and cannot talk about their problems may gain some protection from medications like Fluvoxamine rather than resorting to self-injurious behaviour.

*‘Taking adolescent depression and anxiety seriously means considering the use of medications if we are to prevent some of the young people who suicide and turn to self-medication via substance abuse’*

## Side effects

Side effects can occur while taking Fluvoxamine. Some of these are not serious and will go away within a short time (usually three to five days) or after the dose has been changed. Others are more serious and require you to check with a doctor who is familiar with these medications.

Like the other selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, Fluvoxamine has its own unique set of side effects. The main one being sedation. Thus the tablets are usually given at night which can turn this side effect to therapeutic advantage.

## Common

- Nausea and sometimes vomiting which usually occurs in the first few weeks of therapy and usually subsides
- Asthenia, headache and malaise
- Agitation, anxiety, insomnia, dizziness, tremor, nervousness, somnolence

- Abdominal pain, nausea, anorexia, constipation, dry mouth, dyspepsia
- Chest pain, fastening of the heart rate
- Sweating
- Disinhibition

#### **Less common**

- Ataxia (wobbly walking)
- Confusion
- Extrapyrarnidal symptoms (muscle stiffness, “the look ups”, Pakinsonism)
- Hallucinations
- Postural hypotension
- Rash, itchiness
- Abnormal ( delayed) ejaculation
- Withdrawal syndrome

#### **Rare**

- Seizures
- Liver function abnormality
- Photosensitivity
- Galactorrhoea (producing breast milk)

#### **Before someone takes fluvoxamine**

Check with a doctor or pharmacist if there is a likelihood of any other drugs or medicines both from pharmacies and health food stores as there is always the possibility that there could be a drug interaction eg. between fluvoxamine and paracetamol. Fluvoxamine is a potent blocker of one of the main drug metabolising enzymes so can be involved in many drug interactions

*‘Fluvoxamine is a potent blocker of one of the main drug metabolising enzymes so can be involved in many drug interactions’*

#### **Before starting fluvoxamine**

Make sure that the doctor knows as much about you or your family member as possible so that the best medication can be prescribed. Some other drugs interact with fluvoxamine especially some other antidepressants so if there is a change from one antidepressant to another then depending on which antidepressants are involved there may be a

period of time before starting the fluvoxamine. There are many other drugs that can also affect the time the body takes to process these drugs when fluvoxamine is added, so make sure the doctor knows about any other medication that may be being taken. These interactions may result in increased or decreased effects of the other medication or increased side effects.

#### **How to take it**

Fluvoxamine can be taken with a glass of water or other liquid. Fluvoxamine is marketed as either 100mg or 50mg tablets. The tablets, or part thereof or specially made capsules, should be taken at approximately the same time each night. If fluvoxamine has the opposite effect and causes difficulty sleeping (rare, but possible), then it should be taken in the morning.

#### **How long to take it**

As a discontinuation or withdrawal syndrome can occur with many of the SSRIs it is important that fluvoxamine is not ceased abruptly but tapered off under doctor’s orders. The withdrawal syndrome features include dizziness, nausea, anxiety and headache. Antidepressants including fluvoxamine take 2-4 weeks to work properly. So fluvoxamine may need to be taken for a number of months to get the full benefit or even several years to prevent relapse of symptoms. The doctor will discuss the length of treatment with you. We usually suggest treatment for at least two years after the diagnosis of a major depression.

*‘fluvoxamine is not ceased abruptly but tapered off under doctor’s orders’*

If you would like to find out more about these medicines Judy Longworth in the Department of Psychological Medicine and the Department of Pharmacy at The Children’s Hospital at Westmead would be happy to talk with you on 02 9845 2005.