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Amitriptyline

Amitriptyline is a tricyclic medicine that was once widely used as an antidepressant before being replaced by newer antidepressant medications with better side effect profiles. Other uses of amitriptyline include the treatment of insomnia, enuresis and chronic pain syndromes such as fibromyalgia.

Amitriptyline and other tricyclic antidepressants are finding a place in the treatment of chronic pain and itch associated with some dermatological conditions.

What is amitriptyline used for?

Amitriptyline is useful in reducing the symptoms of chronic pain in the following skin conditions:

- [Vulvodynia](#)
 - [Vestibulodynia](#)
 - [Dysaesthetic vulvodynia](#)
- [Shingles](#) and post-herpetic neuralgia

Pain arising from these conditions is defined as sympathetically maintained pain (SMP). The pain is usually described as having a burning sensation and is often in response to stimuli that does not ordinarily cause pain. This pain originates from the nervous system. Amitriptyline appears to be effective in reducing this type of neuropathic pain in doses lower than those used to treat depression.

Amitriptyline may reduce the pain of chronic ulcers including:

- [Pyoderma gangrenosum](#)
- [Polyarteritis nodosum](#)
- Venous ulceration
- [Epidermolysis bullosa](#).

Amitriptyline is sometimes successfully prescribed for [pruritus](#) (itch), especially when this is of neuropathic origin:

- [Notalgia paraesthetica](#)
- [Brachioradial pruritus](#)

Amitriptyline has some [antihistamine](#) H1 blocking activity and may be useful in the treatment of [urticaria](#) even when conventional antihistamines have failed.

Dosage

Patients are usually started on a low dose of 5–10mg daily, taken at night to minimise side effects. This is gradually increased to a maximum daily dose of 50–150 mg, depending on the response and tolerability of side effects by the patient. Patients need to be warned that pain/itch relief is not immediate as it may take several weeks for the drug to become fully effective.

Side Effects

The side effects of amitriptyline include:

- sedation
- drowsiness
- dry mouth (which could contribute to dental decay)
- blurred vision
- constipation
- difficulty urinating
- dizziness due to drop in blood pressure on standing up (postural hypotension)
- weight gain
- heart rhythm disturbances.

These effects may occur in up to 50% of patients and elderly patients are at greater risk. Intolerance of these effects often leads to discontinuation of the drug. Other tricyclic antidepressants such as desipramine and nortriptyline may be better tolerated than amitriptyline.

It may be dangerous to take amitriptyline with a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) antidepressant medication or within 14 days of discontinuing a MAOI. Adverse effects are likely to be worse with alcohol.

Amitriptyline may not be suitable for people with certain medical conditions or taking certain medications such as anticholinergic agents. Tell your doctor if you have had any of the following health problems:

- Heart disease
- Seizures/epilepsy
- Glaucoma
- Urinary retention
- Overactive thyroid gland
- Drug-related hyperpyrexia.

It may be wise to undergo an electrocardiograph prior to treatment and have this repeated after a few weeks on amitriptyline. Amitriptyline is dangerous in overdose.

Related information

On DermNet NZ:

- [Vulvodynia](#)
- [Vulvar vestibulitis](#)
- [Dysaesthetic vulvodynia](#)
- [Shingles](#)
- [Pruritus](#)

Other websites:

- [Medsafe](#): data sheet for Amitrip

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DermNet does not provide an on-line consultation service.

If you have any concerns with your skin or its treatment, see a [dermatologist](#) for advice.

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