

Phenelzine

Nardil

The classic MAOI — the most sedating one, often chosen for depression that hasn't responded to other treatments (especially “atypical” depression) and for severe social anxiety. Safe only if you follow its food and medicine rules closely.

Tablets: 15 mg

Usually taken 2–3× a day

Food & medicine precautions

Not habit-forming

Generic available

WHAT IT'S FOR

Phenelzine treats depression — often chosen when other antidepressants haven't worked, including “atypical” depression, where you sleep and eat more and feel heavy and drained. It's also one of the most effective treatments for severe social anxiety, and it helps panic disorder. Because it needs careful food and medicine precautions, it usually comes after other options have been tried.

HOW IT WORKS

Phenelzine blocks an enzyme called monoamine oxidase (MAO), which normally clears away serotonin and other mood chemicals, so more of them stay available in the brain. That same enzyme also breaks down a food substance called tyramine — which is why certain aged foods become risky while you're taking it.

WHAT TO EXPECT — OVER TIME

FIRST 1–2 WEEKS

The dose is raised slowly. Feeling lightheaded on standing is common early — stand up slowly. The food and medicine precautions start with your very first dose.

WEEKS 2–6

Your prescriber pushes the dose up to a level that actually works. Mood and anxiety start to lift.

WEEKS 6 ONWARD

Full benefit builds with time — often relief that other medicines couldn't deliver.

HOW TO TAKE IT

- Take it in divided doses through the day (often 2–3 times) — splitting it reduces dizziness.
- The food and medicine precautions begin with your first dose and last about 2 weeks after you stop — the medicine keeps working that long.
- Start low and go up slowly; the dose has to reach a real level to work, so don't be discouraged early.
- Stand up slowly from sitting or lying down, especially at first, to avoid lightheadedness.
- Never stop suddenly — it must be tapered with your prescriber.

CALL YOUR DOCTOR OR GO TO THE ER IF...

- **Hypertensive crisis:** sudden, severe, pounding headache — stiff neck, chest pain, racing heart, sweating, nausea. Call 911
- **Serotonin syndrome:** agitation, fast heartbeat, high fever, sweating, muscle twitching or stiffness. Go to the ER
- **Suicidal thoughts** or a sudden worsening of mood — especially early or after a dose change
- **Fainting or falls** from low blood pressure on standing

COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

EARLY — FIRST DAYS TO WEEKS

- Lightheadedness or dizziness on standing — the most common problem; stand up slowly
- Drowsiness — phenelzine is the most sedating MAOI; taking more of the dose in the evening can help
- Dry mouth or constipation (anticholinergic-type effects)

LONGER-TERM

- Weight gain — more than with other MAOIs, so it's worth watching from the start
- Sexual difficulties (lower drive, delayed orgasm) — common with phenelzine and manageable, so ask
- Numbness or tingling — can be a vitamin B6 (pyridoxine) shortage, treated with a B6 supplement

This is not a complete list of side effects. See the FDA-approved label or your pharmacy handout for the full list.

 WHAT TO KEEP AN EYE ON

Phenelzine needs no routine blood tests — safety comes from the food and medicine rules, plus keeping an eye on blood pressure.

Blood pressure (sitting and standing)	At the start, often weekly for the first 2–4 weeks, then each visit
Weight	At visits — phenelzine causes more weight gain than other MAOIs
New medicines from any provider	Every visit — the recurring danger

 THE SHORT VERSION — WHAT TO STAY WARY OF

One idea explains every MAOI precaution: the medicine removes your body's safety valve for certain substances, so things that are usually harmless can suddenly spike your blood pressure or overload your system with serotonin. In practice that means three habits. First, skip the aged, cured, and fermented foods on the list — fresh food is fine. Second, never take an over-the-counter cold, allergy, or cough medicine, or any stimulant, without your pharmacist's okay; decongestants and dextromethorphan ("DM") are the most common causes of a dangerous reaction. Third, tell every doctor, dentist, and pharmacist that you take an MAOI before any new medicine, procedure, or anesthesia — and carry a card or tag that says so. These precautions also last about two weeks after your last dose.

 FOOD RULES: THE TYRAMINE DIET

Phenelzine lets tyramine build up in aged, fermented, or spoiled foods — enough to spike blood pressure dangerously. Fresh foods are safe.

AVOID

- Aged or matured cheeses (cheddar, blue, parmesan, aged gouda)
- Cured, aged & fermented meats (salami, pepperoni, dry sausage)
- Tap / draft & craft beer, and non-alcoholic beer
- Marmite, Vegemite & concentrated yeast extracts
- Sauerkraut, kimchi & other fermented vegetables
- Soy sauce, miso & fermented soy; anything spoiled

USUALLY FINE

- Fresh cheeses — mozzarella, ricotta, cottage & cream cheese
- Processed cheese slices
- Fresh meat, poultry & fish (properly stored)
- Fresh & cooked vegetables, most fruits
- Bread and grains
- Bottled or canned beer & wine, in moderation

 MEDICINES & SUBSTANCES TO BE CAREFUL WITH

WHAT	MORE INFO	WHAT	MORE INFO
Other antidepressants (SSRIs, SNRIs, most others)	Serotonin syndrome — can be life-threatening — Never combine . Needs a ~2-week washout either way (about 5 weeks off fluoxetine)	Dextromethorphan (DXM, in many cough / cold syrups)	Serotonin syndrome — Never take . Check every cough or cold product with your pharmacist
Another MAOI, or one stopped in the last 2 weeks	Adds up to a dangerous blood-pressure and serotonin reaction — Never combine . Leave a full 2-week gap between MAOIs	Meperidine (Demerol), tramadol & certain other opioids	Serotonin syndrome — including during surgery or dental work — Never combine . Tell any surgeon or dentist you take an MAOI in advance
Decongestants in cold / allergy medicines (pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine)	Blood-pressure crisis — the most common real-world trigger, hidden in many cold products — Never take . Ask your pharmacist for a safe option first	Migraine triptans, St. John's Wort, L-tryptophan	Add to serotonin syndrome risk — Avoid; tell your prescriber before taking any
Stimulants & ADHD medicines (amphetamines, methylphenidate); cocaine, MDMA	Severe blood-pressure spike — Never use unless a specialist directs it with close monitoring	Any new medicine, dental drug, or anesthesia	Several common drugs are dangerous with MAOIs — Tell every doctor, dentist & pharmacist you take an MAOI first; carry MAOI ID

This is not every interaction. Always check with your pharmacist or prescriber before starting any new medicine, supplement, or over-the-counter product.

