Paroxetine is effective in the treatment of Social Phobia

James L. Levenson MD
Robert K. Schneider MD

Revised by Robert K. Schneider MD


Background: Social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder) is a common, potentially disabling, and very under diagnosed condition, characterized by intense fear and often consequential avoidance of situations where the person fears embarrassment or humiliation when interacting with other people. Specific psychological therapies, MAO inhibitors, benzodiazepenes, and SSRIs all have demonstrated some efficacy in its treatment, but large controlled trials are needed.

Aim: To assess the efficacy of paroxetine in the acute treatment of social phobia.

Methods: 290 patients in Europe and South Africa entered a randomized placebo controlled trial and were followed for 12 weeks.

Main Findings: Considerably more patients receiving paroxetine were responders than those receiving placebo (65.7% vs. 32.4%, p<0.001) at the end of the study. Paroxetine was generally well tolerated.

Conclusion: Paroxetine is an effective treatment for patients with social phobia.

Limitations: The investigators excluded any subjects who had any other Axis I psychiatric disorder in the previous six months. Since social phobia is frequently comorbid with other anxiety and mood disorders, this may limit generalizability.

Impact on Internal Medicine: Multiple studies have documented the one year prevalence of social phobia in the general population at 5-8%, yet it is seldom diagnosed let alone treated in primary care settings. Other SSRIs have also been demonstrated to be effective, for example the placebo controlled study of fluvoxamine (Stein, et al. 1999). Symptoms of social anxiety are extremely common in the general population, e.g., anxiety over public speaking, making some question whether social phobia is really an illness. However, those with the full disorder of social phobia have been demonstrated in essentially every study to have a broad range of functional disabilities in occupational, educational and other social roles (Stein and Kean, 2000). Physicians should also remember that psychotherapy has been demonstrated to be effective for social phobia and is underutilized (Goisman, 1999).

Related References
Fluvoxamine treatment of social phobia (social anxiety disorder): a double-blind, placebo-controlled study.