

The family library

DEPRESSION



What is depression?

Depression is a medical illness that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. Depression can cause physical symptoms, too.

Also called major depression, major depressive disorder and clinical depression, it affects how people feel, think and behave. Depression can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. People with depression may have trouble doing normal day-to-day activities, and depression may make one feel as if life isn't worth living.

More than just a bout of the blues, depression isn't a weakness, nor is it something that one can simply "snap out" of. Depression is a chronic illness that usually requires long-term treatment, like diabetes or high blood pressure. Most people with depression feel better with medication, psychological counseling or other treatment.

Symptoms

Depression symptoms include:

- Feelings of sadness or unhappiness
- Irritability or frustration, even over small matters
- Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities
- Reduced sex drive
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Changes in appetite — depression often causes decreased appetite and weight loss, but in some people it causes increased cravings for food and weight gain
- Agitation or restlessness — for example, pacing, hand-wringing or an inability to sit still
- Irritability or angry outbursts

DEPRESSION (cont.)



Symptoms (cont.)

- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- Indecisiveness, distractibility and decreased concentration
- Fatigue, tiredness and loss of energy — even small tasks may seem to require a lot of effort
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures or blaming oneself when things aren't going right
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
- Frequent thoughts of death, dying or suicide
- Crying spells for no apparent reason
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches

For some people, depression symptoms are so severe that it's obvious something isn't right. Other people feel generally miserable or unhappy without really knowing why.

Depression affects each person in different ways, so symptoms caused by depression vary from person to person. Inherited traits, age, gender and cultural background all play a role in how depression may affect each person.

When to see a doctor

If one feels depressed, they should make an appointment to see their doctor as soon as possible. Depression symptoms may not get better on their own — and depression may get worse if it isn't treated. Untreated depression can lead to other mental and physical health problems or problems in other areas of life. Feelings of depression can also lead to suicide.

If people reluctant to seek treatment, they may want to talk to a friend or loved one, a health care professional, a faith leader, or someone else they trust.

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Suicidal thoughts

If someone is having suicidal thoughts, help should be sought right away. Here are some steps that can be taken:

- Contact a family member or friend.
- Seek help from a doctor, a mental health provider or other health care professional.
- Call a suicide hot line number — in the United States, you can reach the toll-free, 24-hour hot line of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 to talk to a trained counselor.
- Contact a minister, spiritual leader or someone in the faith community.

When to get emergency help

If someone may hurt themselves or attempt suicide, 911 or the local emergency number should be called immediately. If someone has harmed himself or herself, or is seriously considering doing so, make sure someone stays with that person. Take him or her to the hospital

Diagnosis

Because depression is common and often goes undiagnosed, some doctors and health care providers may ask questions about mood and thoughts during routine medical visits. They may even ask people to fill out a brief questionnaire to help check for depression symptoms.

When doctors suspect someone has depression, they generally ask a number of questions and may do medical and psychological tests. These can help rule out other problems that could be causing symptoms, pinpoint a diagnosis and also check for any related complications. These exams and tests generally include:

- Physical exam
- Laboratory tests
- Psychological evaluation

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Treatment

Numerous depression treatments are available. Medications and psychological counseling (psychotherapy) are very effective for most people.

In some cases, a primary care doctor can prescribe medications to relieve depression symptoms. However, many people need to see a doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating mental health conditions (psychiatrist). Many people with depression also benefit from seeing a psychologist or other mental health counselor. Usually the most effective treatment for depression is a combination of medication and psychotherapy.

Medications

A number of antidepressant medications are available to treat depression. There are several different types of antidepressants. Antidepressants are generally categorized by how they affect the naturally occurring chemicals in the brain to change mood.

Types of antidepressants include:

- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)
- Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
- Norepinephrine and dopamine reuptake inhibitors (NDRIs)
- Atypical antidepressants
- Tricyclic antidepressants
- Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)
- Other medication strategies

Finding the right medication

Everyone's different, so finding the right medication or medications will likely take some trial and error. This requires patience, as some medications need eight weeks or longer to take full effect and for side effects to ease as the body adjusts. If people have bothersome side effects, they should not stop taking an antidepressant without talking to their doctor first. Some antidepressants can cause withdrawal symptoms unless slowly tapered off the dose,

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Finding the Right Medication *(cont.)*

and quitting suddenly may cause a sudden worsening of depression. People shouldn't give up until they find an antidepressant or medication that's suitable for them — they're likely to find one that works and that doesn't have intolerable side effects.

Psychotherapy

Psychological counseling is another key depression treatment. Psychotherapy is a general term for a way of treating depression by talking about the condition and related issues with a mental health provider. Psychotherapy is also known as therapy, talk therapy, counseling or psychosocial therapy.

Through these talk sessions, one can learn about the causes of depression so that they can better understand it. They also learn how to identify and make changes in unhealthy behavior or thoughts, explore relationships and experiences, find better ways to cope and solve problems, and set realistic goals for life. Psychotherapy can help regain a sense of happiness and control in life and help ease depression symptoms such as hopelessness and anger. It may also help people adjust to a crisis or other current difficulty.

Hospitalization and residential treatment programs

In some people, depression is so severe that a hospital stay is needed. Inpatient hospitalization may be necessary if one isn't able to care for themselves properly or when they're in immediate danger of harming themselves or someone else. Getting psychiatric treatment at a hospital can help keep a person calm and safe until their mood improves. Partial hospitalization or day treatment programs also are helpful for some people. These programs provide the support and counseling one may need while they get symptoms under control.

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Causes

It's not known exactly what causes depression. As with many mental illnesses, it appears a variety of factors may be involved. These include:

- Biological differences
- Neurotransmitters (brain chemicals)
- Hormones
- Inherited traits
- Life events
- Early childhood trauma

Prevention

There's no sure way to prevent depression. However, taking steps to control stress, to increase resilience and to boost low self-esteem may help. Friendship and social support, especially in times of crisis, can help people weather rough spells. In addition, treatment at the earliest sign of a problem can help prevent depression from worsening. Long-term maintenance treatment also may help prevent a relapse of depression symptoms.

Coping and Support

Coping with depression can be challenging. People with depression should talk to their doctor or therapist about improving coping skills, and try these tips:

- Simplify your life
- Consider writing in a journal
- Read reputable self-help books and websites
- Join a support group
- Don't become isolated
- Take care of yourself
- Learn ways to relax and manage your stress
- Structure your time
- Don't make important decisions when you're down

For more information on depression click [HERE](#)