

DEPRESSION

The exact cause of depression is not known. Many researchers believe it is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain, which may be hereditary or caused by events in a person's life.

Some types of depression seem to run in families, but depression can also occur in people who have no family history of the illness. Stressful life changes or events can trigger depression in some people. Usually, a combination of factors is involved.

Men and women of all ages, races, and economic levels can have depression. It occurs more often in women.

Women are especially vulnerable to depression after giving birth. This is a result of hormonal and physical changes. Although new mothers commonly experience temporary "blues," depression that lasts longer than 2 - 3 weeks is not normal and requires treatment.

Major depression can occur in children and teenagers, and they can also benefit from treatment.

THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

Symptoms

- Sad, depressed, empty, or irritable mood most of the day, nearly every day.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most, usually enjoyable activities nearly every day.
- Decreased or increased appetite most everyday, often with significant weight loss or gain.
- Insomnia or sleeping too much, especially wanting to sleep a lot of the daytime.
- Increased or slowed thinking and physical movement nearly every day.
- Fatigue or low energy nearly every day.
- Feelings of worthlessness or haunted with guilt most days.
- Reduced ability to think, concentrate, or make decisions most days.
- Recurring thoughts of death, or suicidal ideas, or planning or attempting suicide.

Signs

- Appears sad, cries more, or is irritable most of the time.
- Displays less interest or enjoyment in their usual enjoyable activities.
- Eats more or less than usual and is gaining or losing weight.

- Not sleeping as much or stays in bed much of the day.
- Thinks, talks, and moves faster or slower than normal.
- Displays tiredness or low energy most everyday.
- Expresses worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
- Has difficulty thinking, or concentrating, or making decisions most everyday.
- Talks about dying, or wanting to die, or suicide plan, or attempts suicide.

Tests & diagnosis

Major depression is diagnosed if a person reports having five or more depressive symptoms for at least 2 weeks. Beck's Depression Scale Inventory or other screening tests for depression can be helpful in making the diagnosis.

Before diagnosing depression, your doctor should rule out medical conditions that can cause symptoms of depression. I may ask you to get blood work done and or a physical exam to help me determine if you have a medical condition that can cause depressive symptoms.

Treatment

Depression can be treated in a variety of ways, particularly with medications and counseling. Most people benefit from a combination of the two treatments. Some studies have shown that antidepressant drug therapy combined with psychotherapy has better results than either one of the therapies alone.

Medications for Depression

Medications include tricyclic antidepressants, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), and some newer antidepressant drugs. Although antidepressant medications can be very effective, some may not be appropriate for everyone.

You may have heard about the 2007 FDA warning that antidepressant medicines could increase the risk of suicidal behavior in children and young adults. It is important to note that while there are NO completed suicides attributed to use of antidepressant medication, the prescribing of antidepressants has dropped, likely because of the warning, and since that time, the number of completed suicides in this age group have GONE UP! Therefore the psychiatric community has concluded that it is significantly safer to use antidepressant medications in children and young adults, when needed, than to withhold it. However, proper monitoring of youth taking psychiatric medications is imperative to maintain its safety.

Lithium and thyroid supplements may be needed to enhance the effectiveness of antidepressants. People with psychotic symptoms, such as delusions or hallucinations, may need anti-psychotic medications. The anti-psychotic medications have also been approved for treating episodes of depression in people with **bipolar disorder**.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a treatment that causes a seizure by means of an electrical current. ECT may improve the mood of severely depressed or suicidal people who don't respond to other treatments.

Research is now being conducted on transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), which alters brain function in a way similar to ECT, but with fewer side effects. Use of light therapy for depressive symptoms in the winter months and interventions to restore a normal sleep cycle may be effective for relieving depression.

As treatment takes effect, negative thinking diminishes. It takes time to feel better, but there are usually day-to-day improvements. It is important to maintain a healthy lifestyle:

- Avoid alcohol and drugs (which make depression worse and may interfere with medications)
- Eat well-balanced meals
- Get regular exercise and sleep
- Seek supportive relationships

Alternative Medicines/ Herbal Supplements

Many consumers try herbal products for depression. St. John's Wort, for instance has a long history of use and has gained popularity as an herbal antidepressant in the United States. Some studies indicate that St. John's Wort was comparable to some antidepressants. However, a large study conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine found that St. John's wort was NOT effective for treating major depression. It is important to exercise caution when considering use of alternative supplements.

Because herbal products can have side effects, always tell your doctor if you are using them. Additionally, please note that herbal supplements are not regulated by the FDA, and therefore one is never sure exactly what is in the supplement in addition to the item purchased, and the exact concentration is also not regulated, and one can be purchasing either too

weak a concoction or a dose that is toxic. Concentrations of the product can vary from bottle to bottle.

Prognosis

The outcome is usually good with treatment. Although most depressive episodes can be effectively treated with either medication, psychotherapy, or both, depression is a recurring problem for many people. For people who have experienced repeated episodes of depression, maintenance treatment may be needed to prevent future recurrences.

Complications

- **Suicide** (up to 15% of people with major depressive disorder die by suicide)
- Increased risk of alcohol- and drug-related problems
- Increased risk of tobacco dependence
- Increased risk of problems with physical health and premature death due to medical illness

A special note about suicide...

Suicide attempts and threats should always be taken seriously. About one-third of people who attempt suicide will repeat the attempt within 1 year, and about 10% of those who threaten or attempt suicide eventually do kill themselves.

Mental health care should be sought immediately. Dismissing the person's behavior as attention-seeking can have devastating consequences.

When to contact a doctor

Call 911, a suicide hotline, or get safely to a nearby emergency room if you have thoughts of suicide, a suicidal plan, or thoughts of harming yourself or others.

Call your doctor right away if:

- You hear voices that are not there.
- You have frequent crying spells with little or no provocation.
- You have had feelings of depression that disrupt work, school, or family life for longer than 2 weeks.

- You think that one of your current medications may be making you feel depressed. DO NOT change or stop any medications without consulting your doctor.
- You believe that you should cut back on drinking, a family member or friend has asked you to cut back, you feel guilty about the amount of alcohol you drink, or you drink alcohol first thing in the morning.

What medications are prescribed for depression and related disorders?

- Anti-depressants: Lexapro, Celexa,, Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Wellbutrin, Effexor, Cymbalta, mirtazepine.
- Anti-anxiety (Immediate action but abusable) :Xanax, Klonopin, Ativan, Valium; (Delayed action) Lexapro, Celexa, Luvox, Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Effexor, Cymbalta, mirtazepine.
- Insomnia aids: mirtazepine, trazadone, phenergan, Ambien, Lunesta, Rozerem, gabapentin, Kepra.
- Bipolar anti-depressants: Lithium, Lamictal, Abilify, Zyprexa with Prozac, Depakote.
- Bipolar mood stabilizers: Depakote, Tegretol, Lithium, Trileptal, Abilify, Geodon, Seroquel, Risperdal, Zyprexa.
- Anti-depressant augmentors: Lithium, thyroxine.
- Alcohol reduction/cessation: Campral, naltrexone, Antabuse, Topomax.
- Narcotic detox/substitution/reduction: Suboxone, clonidine, naltrexone.
- Cocaine/maybe methamphetamine: disulfuram, N-acetyl-cysteine, baclofen, topomax, naltrexone.
- ADHD- Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta, Strattera, Wellbutrin.

Side Effects

If you get side effects from your medicine, it is often possible to choose another medication from the same class with a beneficial side effect. For example, if you have problems sleeping, an antidepressant that has a side effect of making you sleepy is best. If you are too sleepy, a more activating antidepressant would be chosen. Weight gain may be reversed with non-addictive medications as Topomax, amantadine, or Zonegran. Please note that while many of these medications are available for use in specific cases, it is often best to try lifestyle modifications first. For example, insomnia aids should be used sparingly and only for short periods of time. They should always be prescribed after a trial of sleep hygiene has failed; and always used in conjunction with a sleep hygiene regimen.

What if medication doesn't seem to be helping my depression?

If you are not responding to anti-depressants, you may need a re-evaluation by a specialist for another diagnosis or a co-existing

condition. Consultations may reveal a mild form of bipolar symptoms, an anxiety disorder, or other variant types of depression. These conditions often don't respond to conventional anti-depressants and may even be worsened by them. These conditions often respond promptly to other medications. Often a combination of two anti-depressants, such as Zoloft and Wellbutrin, helps treatment-resistant depressions by stimulating different depression center receptors.

Does alcohol use impact my symptoms of depression?

Drinking as little as two drinks per day may reduce or cancel an anti-depressant's benefits. Stimulant abuse with cocaine, crack, methamphetamine, or diet pills use may cause depression or mood swings. Using pain medications and abusing narcotics commonly cause some depression, and withdrawal from them causes even more depression.