

DEPRESSION

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is a medical illness that goes beyond simply feeling “down” or “sad” from time to time. It is not caused by personal weakness. Depression makes a person less able to manage life. It affects your mind, mood, body, and behaviors. It may worsen or even cause medical problems.



WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

Your brain has chemicals that help control your moods. When there are not enough chemicals or when your brain does not respond to the chemicals properly, you may become depressed. Depression can run in families. It can also be linked to events in your life such as the death of a loved one, a divorce or job loss. Taking certain medications, using excessive amounts of drugs and alcohol, or having other illnesses can lead to depression.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION?

The symptoms of depression may include:

- Having no interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad, hopeless, empty, helpless, blue, or emotionally numb
- Feeling guilty and/or worthless
- Crying easily or for no reason
- Thinking negative thoughts
- Thinking about death or suicide

- Having trouble thinking, recalling things or focusing on what you're doing
- Having trouble making everyday decisions
- Having problems sleeping, especially in the early morning or wanting to sleep all of the time
- Fatigue; loss of energy or enthusiasm
- Ongoing physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive problems, and problems with sex

In an older person, the symptoms of depression may be replaced by dizziness, confusion, refusal to eat or drink, paranoia, and/or not thinking clearly.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS?

Depression affects all ages and all races. Typically the first episode occurs between the ages of 25 and 44. The following factors may put you at greater risk for depression:

- Family history of depression
- Life changes such as divorce, death of a loved one, loss of a job, etc.

HOW IS DEPRESSION DIAGNOSED?

To diagnose depression, your Health Care Provider may perform a complete physical and psychological examination, including tests to eliminate conditions that can cause symptoms that look like depression. Your Provider may also ask you to:

- Describe how you feel. (The Provider cannot guess that you are depressed just by looking at you.)
- Answer questions about your health and your family history of health problems.

HOW IS DEPRESSION TREATED?

Depression can be treated with:

- **Medications:** Many medications can be used to treat depression. These medications are called antidepressants. They work to relieve the symptoms of depression.
- **Psychotherapy:** In psychotherapy, you talk with your Health Care Provider about things that are going on in your life. The focus may be on your thoughts and beliefs or on your relationships. The focus may also be on your behavior and how it is affecting you and what you can do differently.
- **Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT):** Electroconvulsive therapy is a common treatment for depression that is normally used for people who don't respond to medications and for those most likely to commit suicide. It is generally safe and effective. In this therapy you are given a light general anesthesia and a muscle relaxant. An electrical current is then passed through your brain for 1 to 3 seconds. This stimulation to your brain will cause a controlled seizure, which usually lasts for 20 to 90 seconds. You will wake up in 5 to 10 minutes and rest for about an hour. Most people require 6 to 10 treatments.
- **Light Therapy:** This therapy is sometimes used for individuals who have periods of depression that come back at the same time each year, usually when days are shorter in the fall and winter. This treatment involves the use of a special type of light to decrease the production of melatonin, a hormone thought to bring on sleep and cause one to feel depressed.

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT DEPRESSION?

You may not be able to prevent depression. However, once treatment for depression begins, you still have to manage on a day-to-day basis. You will need to do the following:

- **See your Health Care Provider regularly:** Your Provider can monitor your progress, provide support and encouragement, and adjust your medication if necessary.
- **Take your medications:** Finding the best medication for you may take several tries. It may take several weeks for you to start seeing results. Once you feel better, continue to take your medications as prescribed.
- **Don't become isolated:** Try to participate in normal activities. Share talking and listening time with a friend often, especially during difficult times. Participate in fun and creative activities.
- **Take care of yourself:**
 - Eat a healthy diet: Avoid caffeine, sugar and heavily salted foods.
 - Get the right amount of sleep: Keep a regular sleep schedule.
 - Exercise regularly: Do exercises that help you relax, focus and reduce stress. Take a daily walk regardless of the weather. It will help keep you in touch with the elements and connects you to the world around you.
 - Try to maintain a calming, safe environment. Seek opportunities to be exposed to light. Record your thoughts and feelings in a journal. When confronted with troubling circumstances, stop to analyze your situation and make a positive choice.
- **Limit alcohol and avoid illegal drugs:** Abuse of alcohol and drugs will slow or prevent your recovery.



REFERENCES / LINKS:

Annals of Internal Medicine

<http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/full/136/10/I56>

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/letstalk.cfm>

National Institute On Aging

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/agepages/depression.htm>

American Academy of Family Physicians

<http://www.familydoctor.org/handouts/587.html>

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR MENTAL HEALTH CARE PROVIDER



- What's the name of my medication and how will it help me?
- What dosage(s) of medication do I need to take?
- At what times of the day should I take them? Do I need to take them with food?
- Do I need to avoid any specific foods, medications, supplements (vitamins, herbs) or activities while I a taking this medication?
- What should I do if I forget to take my medication?
- What side effects might I have? What can I do about them?
- How can I reach you in an emergency?
- How long will it take for me to feel better? What type of improvement should I expect?
- Are there any special risks I should worry about? How can I prevent them? How can I recognize them?
- If my medication needs to be stopped for any reason, how should I do it? (Never stop taking your medication without talking to you Mental Health Provider.)
- Should I have "talk" therapy? What type do you recommend? Is it possible that I could be treated with talk therapy and no medication?
- Is there anything I can do to help my treatment work better, such as changing my diet, physical activity, sleep pattern, or lifestyle?
- If my current treatment isn't helpful, what are my alternatives? What is my next step?
- What risks do I need to consider if I want to become pregnant?
- How can I spot my warning signs?

- How can I explain my condition to my family?
- What should I do if I think about killing myself?

There are two key people on your health care team, you and your health care provider. You are just as important as your provider in directing your health care. The first step you should take in becoming an active team member of your health care team is to understand what you are being treated for and why. Continue to ask questions until you understand the answer. By paying attention to your health and maintaining your own records, you will become an active, informed decision maker in your health care.



Endorsed by: VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention