

Depression

You don't have to feel this way

What is depression?

When doctors talk about depression, they mean the illness called major depression. Someone with major depression has symptoms like those listed in the box to the right nearly every day, all day, for 2 weeks or longer.

If you're depressed, you may also have headaches, other aches and pains, digestive problems, and problems with sex. An older person with depression may feel confused or have trouble grasping simple requests.

What causes depression?

Depression seems to be related to chemical imbalances in the brain that make it hard for the cells to communicate with one another. Depression also seems to be genetic (to run in families).

Depression can be linked to events in your life, such as the death of someone you love, a divorce or job loss. Taking certain medicines, abusing drugs or alcohol, or having other illnesses can also lead to depression. Depression isn't caused by personal weakness, laziness or lack of willpower.

How is depression diagnosed?

If you're having symptoms of depression, be sure to tell your doctor so you can get help. Don't expect your doctor to be able to guess that you're depressed just by looking

Symptoms of depression

- No interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad or empty
- Crying easily or crying for no reason
- Feeling slowed down or feeling restless and unable to sit still
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Weight gain or loss
- Thoughts about death or suicide
- Trouble thinking, recalling things or focusing on what you're doing
- Trouble making everyday decisions
- Problems sleeping, especially in the early morning, or wanting to sleep all of the time
- Feeling tired all of the time
- Feeling numb emotionally, perhaps even to the point of not being able to cry



at you. The sooner you seek treatment, the sooner the depression will lift.

Once you tell your doctor how you're feeling, he or she may ask you some questions about your symptoms, about your health, and about your family history of health problems. Your doctor may also give you a physical exam and do some tests.

How is depression treated?

Depression can be treated with medicines or counseling, or with both.

What about medicines?

Many medicines can be used to treat depression. These medicines are called antidepressants and they work very well. They correct the chemical imbalance in the brain that causes depression.

Antidepressants work differently for different people. They also have different side effects. So, even if one medicine bothers you or doesn't work for you, another may help. You may notice improvement as soon as 1 week after you start taking the medicine. But you probably won't see the full effects for about 6 to 8 weeks. You may have side effects at first but they tend to lessen after a couple of weeks.

How long will I need medicine?

How long you'll need to take the medicine depends on your depression. Your doctor may want you to take medicine for 6 months or longer. You need to take the medicine long enough to reduce the chance that the depression will come back. Talk with your doctor about any questions you have.

Reasons to get help for depression

- Early treatment helps keep depression from getting worse or lasting a long time.
- Thoughts of suicide are common and the risk of suicide is higher if you don't get treatment and your depression comes back. When depression is successfully treated, the thoughts of suicide will go away.
- Treatment can help you return to your "normal" self, enjoying life.
- Treatment can help prevent depression from coming back.

What is counseling?

In counseling, you talk with your family doctor, a psychiatrist or a therapist about things that are going on in your life. The focus may be on your thoughts and beliefs or on your relationships. Or it may be on your behavior, how it's affecting you and what you can do differently.

Will I need to go to the hospital?

Depression can usually be treated through visits to your doctor. Treatment in the hospital may be needed if you have other medical conditions that could affect your treatment or if you're at great risk of suicide.

How long will the depression last?

This depends on how soon you get help. Left untreated, depression often lasts in about 6 months to 1 year. The main risk in not getting treatment is suicide. Treatment can take care of depression in 6 to 8 weeks, or less.

What about suicide?

People with depression sometimes think about suicide. This thinking is part of the depression. If you have thoughts about hurting yourself, tell your doctor, friends or family, or call your local suicide hot line (the number is in the phone book).

Get help right away. The good news is that there are people who can help you and depression can be treated.

For more information

Call the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research Publications Clearinghouse at 800-358-9295 and ask for publication number AHCPR 93-0553.

You can also call the Depression Awareness, Recognition, and Treatment Program at 800-421-4211 or the National Depressive and Manic Depressive Association at 800-82-NDMDA.

Getting through depression

- Pace yourself. Don't expect to do everything you normally can. Set a realistic schedule.
- Don't believe all of your negative thinking, such as blaming yourself or expecting to fail. This thinking is part of depression. These thoughts will go away as your depression lifts.
- Get involved in activities that make you feel good or feel like you've achieved something.
- Avoid making big life decisions during a depression. If you must make a big decision, ask someone you trust to help you.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol. Both make depression worse. Both can cause dangerous side effects with your antidepressants.
- Exercise seems to cause a chemical reaction in the body that may improve your mood. Exercising 4 times a week for at least 30 minutes each time is a good goal. But even less can be helpful.
- Try not to get discouraged. It'll take time for your depression to lift fully.

Additional comments from your family doctor



The American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation has favorably reviewed this material. Favorable review means that medical information is accurate, but does not imply endorsement of any conclusions presented.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

The American Academy of Family Physicians provides health information on the World Wide Web at familydoctor.org.

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