

Depression

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What is it?

Feeling blue or down in the dumps once in a while is a normal part of life. But depression is more than a temporary sadness or grieving a loss. Depression is a complex mental illness that can interfere with the ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy life. Depression is a disease just like diabetes or high blood pressure. It is not something you choose to get and it isn't a sign of weakness or a character flaw.

There are three main categories of depression. When doctors talk about depression, they usually mean *major depression* which affects some 9 million Americans yearly. People with this condition go from periods of normalcy to severe sadness and emptiness. *Dysthymia* is a mild chronic form of depression which can go unrecognized for years because the person can hold a job and participate in life, but he or she experiences no joy and may appear cold, distant, irritable, and rigid. *Bipolar disorder* (manic depression) is characterized by extreme mood swings from irrational highs to incredible lows cycling up and down often with distorted reasoning and judgment.

Who gets it?

Depression affects about 15% of people at some time in their lives of all races and family backgrounds. It's twice as common in women as in men, but no one knows for sure why. It occurs most commonly between the ages of 25 and 44, but it can occur in children, young adults, and older adults. Depression also seems to run in families, though it doesn't happen to everyone who has it in their family history.

What causes it?

Depression can be triggered by chemical imbalances in the brain that make it hard for the cells to communicate with one another. Alternatively, depression might be linked to a stressful event in life, such as death of someone you love, divorce, or job loss. Taking certain medicines, abusing drugs or alcohol, or having other illnesses can also lead to depression.

What are the symptoms?

Someone with major depression has symptoms like those listed in the box below nearly every day, all day, for two weeks or longer. Symptoms can be so subtle and gradual that many people don't realize they have the illness until their bouts of sadness and low self-esteem are overwhelming.

Symptoms of Depression (D2+SADNESS)

- **D for Depressed Mood** - feeling sad, empty, or numb emotionally, perhaps not being able to cry or crying for no reason. Overwhelming hopelessness.
- **D for Decreased Enjoyment** - diminished interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy. Essentially a loss of interest in life.
- **S for Sleep Disturbance** - especially early morning waking or disrupted sleep all night. It can also be wanting to sleep all of the time. Usually you don't feel rested when you get up and often feel worse then when you went to bed.
- **A for Appetite Change** - often leading to weight gain or loss, but without enjoyment from eating.
- **D for Decreased Ability** - to think, remember, concentrate, make decisions or focus on what you're doing. Everyday decisions seem stressful.
- **N for Negative Thoughts** - like guilt, shame or worthless feelings.
- **E for Energy Change** - feeling fatigue or tired all of the time. Lack of motivation.
- **S for Speed** - feeling sluggish or feeling restless and unable to sit still.
- **S for Suicidal Thoughts** - considering harming yourself or thinking you shouldn't have been born. Recurrent thoughts of death.

The diagnosis of major depression is considered in adults when at least 5 of the 9 symptoms are present, including at least one of the first two, in moderate to severe degree for 2 weeks. Older people may also feel confused, tired, weak, or anxious. Depressed children and adolescents may have a tendency toward mood swings, hyperactivity, irritability, and aggressive behavior.

Can it be treated?

Most people with depression can be treated. Herbal medicines are sometimes tried in milder cases. Antidepressants and/or counseling are most often used to treat more severe or recurrent depression. These treatments can ease or reverse symptoms, often dramatically. Left untreated, depression can last months to a year or longer. Treatment can lift a depression within weeks. The lifetime recurrence rate is 50% after one episode of depression, 70% after 2 episodes and 90% after three episodes.

- **Saint-John's-wort** is an herb derived from a yellow-flowered plant *Hypericum perforatum* and is the most popular antidepressant in Germany. In 1996 an article in Britain summarized 23 studies which showed Saint-John's-wort worked nearly three times better than placebo. A three year study is now underway in the United States. It is recommended for mild to moderate depression only. The optimum dosage appears to be 300 milligrams of 0.3% extract of hypericum 3 times a day, probably for at least 4 weeks. Side effects include restlessness, stomach irritation, and mild allergic reactions. Patients should avoid combining it with or altering the dosages of prescribed antidepressants without first consulting their doctor.

- **Antidepressants** help over 80% of all depressed patients by correcting the chemical (*neurotransmitter*) imbalance in the brain that causes depression. Antidepressants often take several weeks to become fully effective. The chance of recurrence can be lowered by taking medication as instructed for at least 6 months after you begin to feel normal. They should not be taken with alcohol or sleeping pills.

- **Others** - There are several newer types of medicines that are unique and chemically unrelated to the other classes. They have various side effects.

- **Psychotherapy** is usually, but not always prescribed in combination with antidepressants. Therapists can help you concentrate on the way you view events in your day-to-day life and help you unlearn behavior patterns that contribute to depression. Or therapy may focus on your behavior, how it's affecting you and what you can do differently.

- **Electroconvulsive therapy**, in which electric currents are applied to an anesthetized patient, is often the treatment for patients who don't respond well to antidepressants or can't tolerate the side effects of these drugs. It is controversial because it was misused in the past, but is painless and usually safe. It can result in temporary memory loss however.

How do you prevent it?

You can't always prevent it once you start having the symptoms, but there are some things that may help. Avoid drugs and alcohol which can make depression worse and exercise regularly to release the feel good chemicals known as endorphins which will keep mood elevated and give you a healthy distraction.

Are there complications?

The main risk in not getting treatment is suicide. Studies suggest that 15% of people with severe depression who are not receiving effective treatment commit suicide. The risk of suicide increases with the age of the person, especially in those over 55 years old. Each year about 25,000 people die from suicide.

Be sure to tell someone or call the suicide hotline at (888) 769-1405 if you think you might want to try to kill yourself. Depression is treatable.

Types of depression medicine

- **Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's)** - Generally considered first line treatment for depression because they are convenient, well tolerated and successful in most people. They also have been used to treat anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, panic reactions and phobias. Common side effects, which are often tolerable and short lived include nausea, diarrhea, insomnia, nervousness, headache, sweating and reduce sexual drive.

- **Tricyclics** - Many people are familiar with this older class of medicines in use since the 1950's. They are also useful in treating insomnia, chronic pain, migraine headache, sleep apnea and fibromyalgia. They are inexpensive since they are often generic. The drawback of tricyclics for many people, however, is the discomfort of side effects such as drowsiness, dry mouth, constipation, sweating, dizziness, or weight gain.

- **Lithium** - This drug is the treatment of choice for bipolar disorder and some forms of recurring major depression. Unfortunately, it can also be toxic if dosed to high and must be monitored carefully.

In summary

- Depression is a medical illness.
- Most people with depression can be helped.
- For more information, contact the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association at (800) 826-3632 or www.ndmda.org or the National Mental Health Association at (800) 969-6642 or www.nmha.org.