

This Information is Provided by the National Institute of Mental Health

Depression

What is depression?

Everyone gets the blues now and then, but when there is little joy or pleasure after visiting with friends or after seeing a good movie, there may be a more serious problem. A depressed mood that stays around for a while, without letting up, can change the way a person thinks or feels. Doctors call this “clinical depression.”

Depression is a common, serious illness and not a personal weakness. Depression can happen to anyone, at any age, and to people of any race or ethnic group. It is never a “normal” part of life. Depression, which is treatable, can come from chemical imbalances in the brain, hormonal changes, medications or things going on in your life.

Women suffer from depression twice as often as men. One out of four women may have depression sometime during their lifetime. Many people suffer with depression but do not seek help.

What are the symptoms of depression?

If you experience five or more of the following symptoms and they last for more than two weeks, or if the symptoms interfere with your daily routine, see a doctor or a qualified mental health professional. A physical examination to rule out other illnesses may be recommended.

- a persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood
- sleeping too little or too much
- reduced appetite and weight loss, or increased appetite and weight gain
- loss of interest or lack of pleasure in activities once enjoyed, including sex
- restlessness or irritability
- persistent physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment (such as headaches, chronic pain, or constipation and other digestive disorders)
- difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- fatigue or loss of energy
- feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless
- thoughts of death or suicide

What causes depression?

Many things can lead to clinical depression. Following are factors that can contribute to the illness:

- **Biological** - People with depression may have too little or too much of certain brain chemicals. Changes in these brain chemicals may cause or play a role in clinical depression.
- **Cognitive** - People with negative thinking and low self-esteem are more likely to develop clinical depression.
- **Gender** - Women experience clinical depression nearly twice as often as men. The reasons for this are still not understood, but may include hormonal changes women go through during menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. Other reasons may include the stress caused by the many responsibilities that women have.
- **Co-occurrence** - Depression is more likely to occur along with certain illnesses, such as heart disease, cancer, Parkinson’s disease, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease and hormonal disorders.
- **Medications** - Side effects of some medications can bring about depression.

- Genetic- A family history of clinical depression increases the risk for developing the illness.
- Situational - Difficult life events, including divorce, financial problems or the death of a loved one can contribute to clinical depression.

How is depression treated?

Depression is the most treatable of all mental illnesses. About 60 percent to 80 percent of depressed people can be treated successfully. Depending on the case, various kinds of therapies seem to work. Treatments such as psychotherapy and support groups help people deal with major changes in life. Several short-term (12-20 weeks) “talk” therapies have proven useful. One method helps patients recognize and change negative thinking patterns that led to the depression. Another approach focuses on improving a patient's relationships with people as a way to reduce depression and feelings of despair. Antidepressant drugs can also help. These medications can improve mood, sleep, appetite and concentration. There are several types of antidepressant drugs available. Drug therapies often take time before there are real signs of progress. It is important to keep taking medication until it has a chance to work. After feeling better, it is important to continue the medication for at least four to nine months to prevent a recurrence of the depression. Never stop taking an antidepressant without consulting your doctor. Antidepressant drugs can have side effects but they are usually temporary. If side effects persist and are troublesome, contact your doctor. In some cases, you may need to try different medicines to find the one(s) that help the most.

Are there things I can do to help myself?

- Set realistic goals and don't take on too many tasks.
- Try to be with others and confide in someone.
- Participate in activities that you enjoy.
- Exercise in moderation.
- Remember feeling better will take time.
- Don't make any important decisions until the depression has lifted.
- Let your family and friends help you.

You can find out more about depression by contacting:

National Institute of Mental Health
866-615-6464

www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/depressionmenu.cfm