

DEPRESSION

Patient Information Fact Sheet

›What is depression?

Depression is an illness that makes you feel sad and miserable over a long period of time. People who are depressed have difficulty coping with everyday life and may even feel suicidal. Depression is associated with a wide range of symptoms and can be treated.

›Who suffers from depression?

Anybody can get depressed at any time of their life. However, some people seem to be more prone to depression than others. This may be because of previous experiences or because of their body chemistry. Women are twice as likely as men to become depressed.

›What causes depression?

Depression is a result of disturbances in your body chemistry. These disturbances can be triggered by traumatic or stressful events, such as bereavement, marriage or relationship problems, unemployment, redundancy, retirement, financial difficulties, an operation, childbirth or an illness. However, it is equally common for depression to have no obvious cause. A special type of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD) occurs mainly in the winter (when there are fewer hours of sunlight during the day) and can be treated with light therapy. Postpartum depression is moderate to severe in a woman after she has given birth. It may occur soon after delivery or up to a year later. Most of the time, it occurs within the first 3 months after delivery.

›Possible symptoms of depression:

- Feeling miserable and upset
- Feeling tired and lacking motivation
- Feeling useless, helpless, and hopeless
- Loss or gain in appetite and/or weight
- Lack of sleep or excessive sleeping
- Loss of sex drive
- Forgetfulness
- Restlessness
- Self-hatred
- Irrational fears
- Oversensitivity
- Bursts of anger or impatience
- Physical aches and pains
- Suicidal ideas (feeling life is not worth living)
- Delusions and/or hallucinations

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›How is depression treated?

Depression is treated with counseling and/or **antidepressant drugs**. Antidepressants can be taken over a long period of time and are not addictive. However, they need to be taken regularly for some weeks to have an effect, and then continued for at least six months to avoid relapse of depressive symptoms. Some people experience side effects such as a dry mouth or feeling sick when they first take antidepressants, but these usually wear off after one to two weeks. There are several different classes of antidepressants but they all aim to correct the chemical imbalance in the body that is thought to causes the symptoms of depression. These classes include **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors** (SSRIs), **serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors** (SNRIs), **tricyclic antidepressants**, and other classes. Your doctor will prescribe an antidepressant that he or she thinks is best suited to you as an individual. Counseling helps you talk through your feelings and any problems. If you need counseling your doctor will refer you to a counselor.

›Self-help measures

- Learn how to relax using relaxation exercises and tapes, yoga, meditation or aromatherapy to relieve the tension, anxiety, and irritability of depression.
- Exercise to stimulate your levels of brain chemicals and make you feel more alert and motivated.
- Slow down your pace of life: take a vacation, try to reduce your work stress, and take short rests (even if only for a few minutes) during the day.
- Eat a well-balanced diet. Depression may tempt you to under- or overeat (especially junk food). A diet lacking the necessary vitamins and minerals can make you feel worse.
- Avoid smoking, illegal drugs, and alcohol. These may give you a short-term “high”, but are not helpful in the long run.
- Keep occupied, through a hobby, reading a book or even watching television. You will dwell on your depression when inactive, making you feel worse.
- Join a self-help group. Discussing your fears and symptoms with other sufferers will help you feel less isolated. Details of self-help groups are available through Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (see below).

›Further information

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: www.dbsalliance.org

National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml

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