

Depression

Depression is much more than feeling in a low mood after a sad or stressful experience. Depression is a serious mental and physical illness that changes how a person thinks, feels and behaves. People with depression need professional help and sometimes medicines to get better.

Depression is very common. About one in six people experience depression during their life. There are different types of depression that may have slightly different symptoms and need different treatments.

Signs and symptoms

Depression can affect thoughts, feelings, mood, behaviour and physical health. Common symptoms include:

- Loss of interest and enjoyment in life
- Thinking and feeling sad, hopeless, helpless, in despair
- Thinking and feeling worthless
- Feeling irritable, anxious, moody, angry
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Appetite and weight changes
- Tiredness, loss of energy

- Trouble thinking, concentrating and making decisions
- Thoughts of suicide or death
- Problems with sexual function or loss of interest in sex
- Headaches and body aches and pains
- Increase in alcohol and drug use.

If you have had any of these symptoms for more than two weeks, talk to your doctor. If you are a parent, be alert to these symptoms in teenagers.

Cause

Anyone can develop depression at any age, but it is more common in people with a family history of depression. Depression may be at least partly due to chemical changes in the brain. It is often triggered by a combination of factors.

Factors that may contribute to an episode of depression include:

- Emotional stress (e.g. loss of a loved one, a relationship breakdown)
- Hormone changes (e.g. after childbirth, around menopause)
- Isolation or loneliness
- Unemployment
- Alcohol, nicotine and drug abuse
- Medicines (e.g. some hormone, pain relieving, blood pressure, heart, cancer and psychiatric medicines)
- Medical conditions (e.g. cancer, diabetes, HIV, stroke, thyroid problems)
- Pain
- Poor physical health or physical disability
- Personality type
- Other mental illnesses (e.g. anxiety, dementia, schizophrenia).

Treatment

There are several different forms of therapy for depression. Successful treatment often involves using more than one form of therapy. Always consult a doctor before using complementary therapies to treat depression.

Talking and support

Talking is often the first step in managing depression. Counselling and other psychological therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) are important treatments.

Local doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and some counsellors can help with these therapies.

Antidepressant medicines

Antidepressant medicines can correct the balance of chemicals in the brain. There are many types of antidepressants and a person may need to try several antidepressants before finding one that suits them. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice about antidepressants.

Antidepressant medicines:

- Must be prescribed by a doctor
- Are not addictive
- May take 6-8 weeks to reach full effect, although some people see benefits sooner
- May cause drowsiness
- Need to be taken regularly and must not be stopped suddenly. Antidepressants should always be stopped slowly, with a doctor's supervision
- Can interact with other medicines, including non-prescription and complementary medicines (e.g. herbal medicines).

Alcohol and certain foods must be avoided while taking some antidepressant medicines.

Other medicines

Sometimes doctors prescribe other medicines (e.g. lithium, antipsychotic medicines) together with antidepressants to treat some types of depression.

Self Care

- Learn about depression and its treatment.
- Ask for help. Depression is an illness, not a weakness.
- Some people find it helpful to keep a diary or write down their thoughts and feelings.
- Let family and friends know how you are feeling. Even though they may not fully understand what you're going through, they may be able to give you extra support.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to relax your body and mind.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. Exercise can help improve your mood and physical health.
- Limit or stop smoking. Nicotine can make anxiety worse. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- Follow 'low-risk' drinking guidelines for alcohol or stop drinking alcohol. Alcohol (and other drugs) can make depression worse. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- Limit or stop caffeine (e.g. tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks). Caffeine can make anxiety worse.
- Look after yourself. Do some things that you enjoy.

Important

- It is normal to feel in a low mood after a sad or stressful event. However, if low feelings become overwhelming or last for more than two weeks and other symptoms of depression develop, consult a doctor.
- Feelings of hopelessness and despair can lead to thoughts of suicide and self harm. These thoughts are serious and dangerous. If you experience these thoughts, get help.

Getting help

There are many organisations that provide help and support for people with depression and for their families and friends. Ask a doctor or pharmacist or contact one of the organisations listed under 'For more information'.

For more information

A doctor Listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Beyondblue

Phone: 1300 22 4636

Website: www.beyondblue.org.au

Community health and mental health centres

Listed in the front of your local white pages.

Kids Help Line

Phone: 1800 55 1800 (24 hours)

Website: www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline

Phone: 13 11 14 (24 hours)

Website: www.lifeline.org.au

Salvation Army Support Services

Under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book.

The MoodGYM cognitive behaviour therapy training program

Website: www.moodgym.anu.edu.au

BlueBoard online support group

Website: www.blueboard.anu.edu.au

BluePages Depression Information

Website: www.bluepages.anu.edu.au

Ecouch self help interactive program

Website: www.ecouch.anu.edu.au

National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd

Website: www.headspace.org.au

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS)

Phone 1800 011 046

Website: www.dva.gov.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

NPS: Better choices, Better health

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Related fact cards

- » Anxiety
- » Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- » Relaxation Techniques
- » Sleeping Problems

Your Self Care Pharmacy: