

Managing Depression

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What is depression?

Depression is an illness that causes you to feel sad, lose interest in activities that you've always enjoyed, withdraw from others, and have little energy. It's different from normal feelings of sadness, grief, or low energy. Depression can also cause people to feel hopeless about the future and even think about suicide.

Many people, and sometimes their families, feel embarrassed or ashamed about having depression. Don't let these feelings stand in the way of getting treatment. Remember that depression is a common illness. It affects the young and old, men and women, all ethnic groups, and all professions.

If you think you may be depressed, tell your doctor. Treatment can help you enjoy life again. The sooner you get treatment, the sooner you will feel better.

What causes depression?

Depression is a disease. It's not caused by personal weakness and is not a character flaw. When you have depression, chemicals in your brain called neurotransmitters are out of balance.

Most experts believe that a combination of family history (your genes) and stressful life events may cause depression. Life events can include a death in the family or having a long-term health problem.

Just because you have a family member with depression or have stressful life events doesn't mean you'll get depression.

You also may get depressed even if there is no reason you can think of.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of depression may be hard to notice at first. They vary among people, and you may confuse them with just feeling "off" or with another health problem.

The two most common symptoms of depression are:

- Feeling sad or hopeless nearly every day for at least 2 weeks.
- Losing interest in or not getting pleasure from most daily activities nearly every day for at least 2 weeks.

A serious symptom of depression is thinking about death or suicide. If you or someone you care about talks about this or feeling hopeless, get help right away.

If you think you may have depression, take a short quiz to check your symptoms:

How is it treated?

Depression can be treated in various ways. Counseling, psychotherapy, and antidepressant medicines can all be used. Lifestyle changes, such as getting more exercise, also may help.

Work with your health care team to find the best treatment for you. It may take a few tries, and it can take several weeks for the medicine to start working. Try to be patient and keep following your treatment plan.

Depression can return (relapse). How likely you are to get depression again increases each time you have a bout of depression. Taking your medicines and continuing some types of therapy after you feel better can help keep that from happening. Some people need to take medicine for the rest of their lives. This doesn't stop them from living full and happy lives.

What can you do if a loved one has depression?

If someone you care for is depressed, the best thing you can do is help the person get or stay in treatment. Learn about the disease. Talk to the person, and gently encourage him or her to do things and see people. Don't get upset with the person. The behavior you see is the disease, not the person.

Additional Information

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)(800) 467-3589

<http://www.namitn.org/questions.htm> (Tennessee chapter of NAMI)

<http://www.psych.org> (American Psychiatric Association)

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov> (National Institute of Mental Health)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255

Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network www.tspn.org (615) 297-1077