



Patient education: Depression in children and teens – Discharge instructions (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What are discharge instructions?

Discharge instructions are information about how to take care of your child after getting medical care at a hospital for a health problem.

What is depression?

Depression is a medical disorder that makes a person sad, but it is different from normal sadness. Depression can make it hard for a child to enjoy activities, perform well in school, and relate to their friends, family, and teachers.

Tell the doctor or nurse if your child has symptoms of depression, like:

- Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless for longer than a few days
- Having little interest or pleasure in things that used to make them feel good
- Having low energy, or being tired all of the time
- Having trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much
- Having a poor appetite, or eating too much
- Feeling bad about themselves, thinking that they are a failure, or feeling like they have let themselves or their family down
- Having trouble paying attention or making decisions

- Moving or speaking so slowly that other people might notice, or acting very restless and fidgety
- Having thoughts that they would be better off dead, or thoughts of hurting themselves in some way

People often think of depression as an adult problem and not something that affects children. But children, especially teens, can suffer from depression.

Get help right away if your child is thinking of hurting or killing themselves!

Sometimes, people with depression think of hurting or killing themselves. If your child ever feels like they might hurt themselves or someone else, help is available:

- In the US, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:
 - To speak to someone, call or text **988**.
 - To talk to someone online, go to www.988lifeline.org/chat.
- Call your doctor or nurse, and tell them it is an emergency.
- Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1).
- Go to the emergency department at the nearest hospital.

How do I care for my child at home?

Ask the doctor or nurse what you should do when you go home. Make sure that you understand exactly what you need to do to care for your child. Ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

You should also:

- Give your child their medicines exactly as the doctor tells you, so they get the correct amount of each medicine.
 - Some people find using reminders or a weekly pill box helpful.
 - If your child is having side effects, talk to the doctor. Many side effects go away after a few days or weeks of use.

- Take your child to all of their appointments. This might include counseling sessions, support groups, or appointments for medical treatments. There might be sessions for the whole family to attend as well as individual appointments.
- Try to talk openly about feelings in your family. This is very important, and helps if there is something that upsets your child.
- Tell trusted family and friends about your child's depression and how they can help. Talk to your child's teachers, too. Other people can help by looking for changes in how your child acts.
- Talk to your child about how drinking alcohol, smoking or vaping, and using recreational drugs can cause changes in their body. Your child needs to know that these things can make depressed feelings worse. Do not use these substances around your child.
- Encourage your child to get regular physical activity. Even gentle forms of activity, like walking, are good for their health. If possible, try to do activities with your child. You might want to take a walk or play outside with your child.
- Help your child find healthy ways to handle stress, like hobbies they enjoy. Relaxation exercises, meditation, and activities like yoga or tai chi can help your child handle stress.
- Encourage your child to get at least 8 hours of sleep every night. If they have trouble sleeping, help them improve their sleep habits. For example, they can:
 - Avoid drinking caffeine in the late afternoon or evening.
 - Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
 - Limit their naps during the day, and avoid napping for more than 30 minutes at a time.
- Offer your child a healthy diet that includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. This can help improve their overall health.

What follow-up care does my child need?

Your child's depression needs to be watched closely. The doctor or nurse might ask you to make a follow-up appointment for them to check on their progress. Go to these appointments.

When should I call the doctor?

Call for advice if:

- Your child's depression does not get better within 1 or 2 weeks.
 - Your child's depression is getting worse.
 - Family, teachers, or friends say that they are worried about your child.
 - Your child continues to have problems eating or sleeping.
 - Your child is doing poorly at work, at home, or in school.
 - Your child's medicine is causing side effects that bother them.
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