



# Patient education: Depression in children and teens (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is depression?

Depression is a 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 family, friends, and teachers.

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

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## What causes depression?

Depression is caused by problems with chemicals in the brain called "neurotransmitters." Some people might be more likely to have depression if it runs in their family. Other things might also play a role, including hormones, certain health problems, medicines, stress, being mistreated as a child, family problems, and problems with friends or at school or work.

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## How do I know if my child is depressed?

Children and teens with depression feel down most of the time for at least 2 weeks. They also have at least 1 of these 2 symptoms:

- They no longer enjoy or care about doing the things that they used to like to do.
- They feel sad, down, hopeless, or cranky most of the day, almost every day.

Children and teens with depression often do not express their emotions in the same way as adults. They can appear to be irritable, grouchy, or annoyed by almost everyone and everything. They might also respond to frustration with anger.

Children and teens with depression also have other symptoms. Examples include:

- Being negative, picking fights, or arguing a lot
- Feeling like life is unfair most of the time
- Being very restless, fidgeting a lot, or moving or speaking more slowly than normal
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Eating too much or too little, or gaining or losing weight without trying
- Not having a lot of energy
- Feeling guilty, helpless, or like they are worth nothing
- Doing thrill-seeking, risky behaviors like drug use or having unprotected sex
- Having trouble with concentration and memory
- Having repeated thoughts of death or killing themselves

It can be hard to tell the difference between depression and the normal challenges of childhood and adolescence. If you think that your child might be depressed, bring them to see a doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

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## **How is depression diagnosed in children and teens?**

Your child's doctor or nurse will do a physical exam and might order tests. They will ask you questions and might want to speak with your child in private.

Sometimes, people want to blame their child's symptoms on normal childhood problems. But depression can have a big impact on your child's life. Luckily, depression can be treated, and the sooner treatment is started, the better it works.

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## **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](https://www.988lifeline.org/chat).

- Call their 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.
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## How is depression treated in children and teens?

Your child's doctor or nurse will work with you and your child to make a treatment plan.

Treatment can include:

- Counseling (with a psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse, or social worker)
- Medicines that relieve depression
- Creating a plan to limit access to items that they might use to harm themselves
- Helping you and your child learn more about depression
- Other treatments that pass magnetic waves or electricity into the brain

Treatment for depression can help your child's symptoms. Treatment can also help them do well in school, develop and maintain healthy relationships, and feel more self-confident.

In addition to treatment, getting regular physical activity can also help your child feel better.

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## When will my child feel better?

Treatment for depression can take a little while to start working. How long depends on the type of treatment your child is having.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Depression in children and teens – Discharge instructions \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Premenstrual syndrome \(PMS\) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder \(PMDD\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Medicines for depression \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Electroconvulsive therapy \(ECT\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Post-traumatic stress disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression during and after pregnancy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: When you have depression and another health problem \(The Basics\)](#)

Patient education: Depression in children and adolescents (Beyond the Basics)

Patient education: Depression treatment options for children and adolescents (Beyond the Basics)

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Patient education: Bipolar disorder (Beyond the Basics)

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