

What is depression?

Depression is a serious mood disorder that affects your whole body, including your mood and thoughts. It touches every part of your life. It's important to know that depression is not a personal weakness or character flaw. Treatment is often needed.

Once you've had an episode of depression, you are at risk of having more throughout life. If you don't get treatment, depression can happen more often and be more serious.

What causes depression?

Researchers are studying the causes of depression. Several factors seem to play a role. It may be caused by chemical changes in the brain. It also tends to run in families. Depression can be triggered by life events or certain illnesses. It can also develop without a clear trigger.

What are the symptoms of depression?

While each person may experience symptoms differently, these are the most common symptoms of depression:

- Lasting sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Loss of interest in almost all activities
- Appetite and weight changes
- Changes in sleep patterns, such as inability to sleep or sleeping too much
- Slowing of physical activity, speech, and thinking OR agitation, increased restlessness, and irritability
- Decreased energy, feeling tired or "slowed down" almost every day
- Ongoing feelings of worthlessness or feelings of undue guilt
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Repeating thoughts of death or [suicide](#), wishing to die, or attempting suicide (**Note:** This needs emergency treatment.)

If you have 5 or more of these symptoms for at least 2 weeks, you may be diagnosed with depression. These symptoms would be a noticeable change from what's "normal" for you.

The symptoms of depression may look like other mental health conditions. Always see a healthcare provider for a diagnosis.

How is depression diagnosed?

Depression can happen along with other medical conditions. These include heart disease or cancer, as well as other mental health conditions. Early diagnosis and treatment are key to recovery.

A diagnosis is made after a careful mental health exam and medical history. This is usually done by a mental health professional.

How is depression treated?

Treatment for depression may include one or a combination of the following:

Medicine. Antidepressants work by affecting the brain chemicals. Know that it takes 4 to 8 weeks for these medicines to have a full effect. Keep taking the medicine, even if it doesn't seem to be working at first. Never stop taking your medicine or change your dose without first talking to your healthcare provider. Some people have to switch medicines or add medicines to get results. Work closely with your healthcare provider to find treatment that works for you.

Therapy. This is most often cognitive behavioral or interpersonal therapy. It focuses on changing the distorted views you have of yourself and your situation. It also works to improve relationships and identify and manage stressors in your life.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). This treatment may be used to treat severe, life-threatening depression that has not responded to medicines. A mild electrical current is passed through the brain. This triggers a brief seizure. For unknown reasons, the seizures help restore the normal balance of chemicals in the brain and ease symptoms.

With treatment, you should start to feel better within a few weeks, but it can take longer. Stay connected with your healthcare provider and let them know if you are not starting to feel better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or even years. Continued treatment may help to prevent depression from appearing again.

Depression can make you feel exhausted, worthless, helpless, and hopeless. It's important to realize that these negative views are part of the depression and don't reflect reality. Negative thinking fades as treatment starts to take effect. Meanwhile, consider the following:

Get help. Being depressed is miserable and impacts all aspects of life, including your relationships and long-term health. If you think you may be depressed, see a healthcare provider as soon as possible.

Set realistic goals in light of the depression and don't take on too much.

Break large tasks into small ones. Set priorities, and do what you can as you can.

Try to be with other people and confide in someone. It's usually better than being alone and secretive.

Do things that make you feel better. Going to a movie, gardening, or taking part in religious, social, or other activities may help. Doing something nice for someone else can also help you feel better.

Get regular exercise. Studies show exercise can improve mood.

Expect your mood to get better slowly, not right away. Feeling better takes time.

Eat healthy, well-balanced meals.

Stay away from alcohol and drugs. These can often make depression worse.

It's best to delay important decisions until the depression has lifted. Before deciding to make a big change—such as changing jobs or getting married or divorced—discuss it with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.

Remember: People don't "snap out of" a depression. But they can feel a little better day-by-day.

Try to be patient and focus on the positives. This may help replace the negative thinking that is part of the depression. The negative thoughts will fade as your depression responds to treatment.

Let your family and friends help you.

When should I call my healthcare provider?

If you have 5 or more of these symptoms for at least 2 weeks, call your healthcare provider:

Lasting sad, anxious, or "empty" mood

Loss of interest in almost all activities

Appetite and weight changes

Changes in sleep patterns, such as inability to sleep or sleeping too much

Slowing of physical activity, speech, and thinking OR agitation, increased restlessness, and irritability

Decreased energy, feeling tired or "slowed down" almost every day

Ongoing feelings of worthlessness or feelings of undue guilt

Trouble concentrating or making decisions

Not eating or overeating

Repeating thoughts of death or suicide, wishing to die, or attempting suicide (**Note:** This needs emergency treatment, please see below.)

Key points about depression

Depression is a serious, treatable mood disorder that affects your whole body, including your mood and thoughts.

It's likely caused by several factors, such as the environment or a chemical imbalance in the brain. Some types of depression seem to run in families.

Depression causes ongoing, extreme feelings of sadness, helplessness, hopeless, and irritability. These feelings are usually a noticeable change from what's "normal" for you, and they last for more than 2 weeks.

Depression is most often treated with medicine or therapy, or a combination of both.

Sometimes people with severe depression have thoughts of harming themselves. Tell someone right away if you feel this way. Call or text 988 or go to an emergency room if you have a suicide plan and the means to carry it out.

If you're one of the more than 14.8 million American adults who experiences major depression, you may feel so bad that you can't get out of bed, be around the people you love or participate in activities that you usually enjoy. Actually, there are more than 50 different symptoms of major depression, ranging from the well-known—crying and sadness—to those you might never associate with depression, such as anger, workaholism and back pain.

Depression is a disease that affects every aspect of a person's life, not just mood, says Johns Hopkins expert [Andrew Angelino, M.D.](#), Chair of Psychiatry at Howard County General Hospital. The World Health Organization predicts that by 2020, depression will be the second-leading cause of disability in the world, just behind [cardiovascular disease](#).

People who are depressed are far more likely to have other chronic medical conditions, including cardiovascular disease, back problems, arthritis, diabetes, and high blood pressure, and to have worse outcomes. Untreated depression can even affect your [immune response](#) to some vaccines.

Depression is not just debilitating; it can be deadly. An estimated one out of five people with depression will attempt suicide at some point.

Causes and Risk Factors

Depression is not a mood you can just get over. It is a disease in which the brain ceases to register pleasurable activities, says Angelino. Indeed, MRI studies with depressed people have found changes in the parts of the brain that play a significant role in depression.

Women are about twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression. You're also more likely to develop depression if you are between ages 45 and 64, nonwhite, or divorced, and if you never graduated high school, can't work or are unemployed, and don't have health insurance. Other risks for depression include factors such as these:

Experiencing stressful events in your life, such as losing your job, having problems in your marriage, major health problems, and/or financial challenges.
Having a bad childhood, such as one involving abuse, poor relationships with your parents, and/or your parents own marital problems.
Certain personality traits, such as getting extremely upset when you're stressed.
A family history of depression, which can increase your own risk three or four times.

Depression is far more common than you might think, with nearly one out of 10 adults depressed at any time, about half of them severely.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Symptoms of depression vary widely but can be divided into three main categories:

Emotional and cognitive (thinking) symptoms include a depressed mood, lack of interest or motivation in things you typically enjoy, problems making decisions, irritability, excessive worrying, memory problems and excessive guilt.

Physical symptoms include fatigue, sleep problems (such as waking too early, problems falling or staying asleep, sleeping too much), changes in appetite, weight loss or gain, aches and pains, headaches, [heart palpitations](#), and burning or tingling sensations.

Behavioral symptoms include crying uncontrollably, having angry outbursts, withdrawing from friends and family, becoming a workaholic, abusing alcohol or drugs, cutting or otherwise hurting yourself, and, in the worst cases, considering or attempting suicide.

Depression can be classified as:

Major depressive disorder (MDD), which includes depressed mood and/or reduced interest and pleasure in life, considered “core” symptoms, and other symptoms that significantly affect daily life.

Dysthymia, (dis-THI-me-a), a milder form of depression that can progress to MDD.

Postpartum depression, which occurs within weeks of giving birth.

Psychotic depression, which comes with delusions and/or hallucinations.

Seasonal affective depression, which occurs as the days get shorter and improves with spring.

#TomorrowsDiscoveries: How the Brain Processes Incentives and Rewards | Vikram S. Chib, Ph.D.



Johns Hopkins researcher Vikram S. Chib studies the way incentives and rewards work in the brain and how this can lead to breakthroughs in depression treatment.

Definitions

Cardiovascular (car-dee-oh-vas-cue-ler) disease: Problems of the heart or blood vessels, often caused by atherosclerosis—the build-up of fat deposits in artery walls—and by high blood pressure, which can weaken blood vessels, encourage atherosclerosis and make arteries stiff. Heart valve disorders, heart failure and off-beat heart rhythms (called arrhythmias) are also types of cardiovascular disease.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT): Two different psychotherapies—cognitive therapy and behavioral therapy— in one. Cognitive therapy can help you improve your mood by changing unhelpful thinking patterns. Behavioral therapy helps you identify and solve unhealthy habits. When used in conjunction with each another, these therapies have been shown to improve problems such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, insomnia and eating disorders.

Heart palpitations (pal-peh-tay-shuns): The feeling that your heart is thumping, racing, flip-flopping or skipping beats. Strong emotions, caffeine, nicotine, vigorous exercise, medical conditions (such as low blood sugar or dehydration) and some medications may cause heart palpitations. Call 911 if you also have chest pain, shortness of breath or unusual sweating, or feel dizzy or faint.

Immune response: How your immune system recognizes and defends itself against bacteria, viruses, toxins and other harmful substances. A response can include anything from coughing and sneezing to an increase in white blood cells, which attack foreign substances.

Interpersonal therapy (IPT): A treatment often used for depression that lifts mood by teaching you how to relate with others in a healthier way. A therapist will help you identify troubling emotions and their triggers, express emotions in a more productive way and examine past relationships that may have contributed to your current mental health issues.

Lean protein: Meats and other protein-rich foods low in saturated fat. These include boneless skinless chicken and turkey, extra-lean ground beef, beans, fat-free yogurt, seafood, tofu, tempeh and lean cuts of red meat, such as round steaks and roasts, top loin and top sirloin. Choosing these can help control cholesterol.

Omega-3 fatty acids (oh-may-ga three fah-tee a-sids): Healthy polyunsaturated fats that the body uses to build brain-cell membranes. They're considered essential fats because our body needs them but can't make them on its own; we must take them in through food or supplements. A diet rich in omega-3s—found in fatty fish, like salmon, tuna and mackerel, as well as in walnuts, flaxseed and canola oil—and low in saturated fats may help protect against heart disease, stroke, cancer and inflammatory bowel disease.

Whole grains: Grains such as whole wheat, brown rice and barley still have their fiber-rich outer shell, called the bran, and inner germ. It provides vitamins, minerals and good fats. Choosing whole grain side dishes, cereals, breads and more may lower the risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer and improve digestion, too.