

What is Depression?

The symptoms of depression can be complex and vary widely between people. As a general rule, if you are depressed you feel sad, hopeless and lose interest in things you used to enjoy, as well as experiencing a number of the psychological, physical and social symptoms listed below. These symptoms persist for weeks or months and are bad enough to interfere with your work, social life and family life.

If you experience some of these symptoms for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks, you might be suffering from depression.

Psychological symptoms include:

- continuous low mood or sadness
- feeling hopeless and helpless
- having low self-esteem
- feeling tearful
- feeling guilt-ridden
- feeling irritable and intolerant of others
- having no motivation or interest in things
- finding it difficult to make decisions
- not getting any enjoyment out of life
- having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming yourself
- feeling anxious or worried

Physical symptoms include:

- moving or speaking more slowly than usual
- change in appetite or weight (usually decreased, but sometimes increased)
- constipation
- unexplained aches and pains
- lack of energy or lack of interest in sex
- changes to your menstrual cycle
- disturbed sleep (for example, finding it hard to fall asleep at night or waking up very early in the morning)

Social symptoms include:

- not doing well at work
- taking part in fewer social activities and avoiding contact with friends
- neglecting your hobbies and interests

- having difficulties in your home and family life

Depression often starts gradually with a slow deterioration in the person's ability to cope. This can make it difficult for the person who is suffering from depression to realize that there is a problem, and it may take a friend or family member to notice that there is something wrong that needs attention.

Depression may be classified as mild (when it has some impact on your daily life), moderate (it has a significant impact on your daily life) and severe (when it is almost impossible to get through daily life). A few people with severe depression may have psychotic symptoms when they develop beliefs that are out of touch with reality or when they start to hallucinate.

Grief and depression

It can be hard to distinguish between grief and depression. They share many of the same characteristics, but there are important differences between them.

Grief is an entirely natural response to a loss, while depression is an illness. People who are grieving find their feelings of loss and sadness come and go, but they're still able to enjoy things and look forward to the future. In contrast, people who are depressed have a constant feeling of sadness. They don't enjoy anything and find it hard to be positive about the future.

Other types of depression

There are different types of depression, and some conditions where depression may be one of the symptoms. These include:

○ *Postnatal depression*

Some women develop depression after having a baby. Postnatal depression is treated in similar ways to other forms of depression, with psychological therapies and antidepressant medicines.

○ *Bipolar depression*

Bipolar disorder is also known as 'manic depression'. People who have bipolar disorder have episodes of depression, but also episodes of excessively high or irritable mood lasting days to weeks. The bouts of mania (or hypomania which is not as severe) can include harmful behaviour such as gambling, going on spending sprees and having unsafe sex. This is not just normal happiness, but must be out of keeping with the individual's normal character.

- *Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)*

Also known as 'winter depression', SAD is a type of depression that has a seasonal pattern usually related to winter.

Causes of depression

- There is no single cause of depression. For some people there is a trigger such as an upsetting or stressful life event that sets off the depression. Often there is a series of triggers (such as feeling low after an illness and then experiencing a bereavement, or losing your job and then going through a divorce). People often talk of a downward spiral of events that leads to depression. For example, if your relationship with your partner breaks down, you're likely to feel low, so you stop seeing friends and family, and you may start drinking more. All of this can make you feel even worse and trigger depression.
- Some studies have also suggested you're more likely to get depression as you get older and that it's more common if you live in difficult social and economic circumstances.
- Stressful events also put you at higher risk of developing depression as does the development of a chronic or life-threatening illness such as heart disease or cancer. Head injuries can also trigger mood swings and emotional problems which may lead to depression.
- You may be more vulnerable to depression if you have certain personality traits, such as low self-esteem or being overly self-critical. This may be due to the genes you've inherited from your parents, or because of your personality or early life experiences.
- If someone else in your family, such as a parent or sister or brother, has suffered from depression in the past, then it's more likely that you will too.
- Some women are particularly vulnerable to depression after pregnancy. The hormonal and physical changes, as well as the added responsibility of a new life, can lead to postnatal depression.
- Becoming cut off from your family and friends can increase your risk of depression.
- Some people try to cope when life is getting them down by drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs. This can result in a spiral of depression, and both alcohol and cannabis have been associated with the development of depression

Treatment for depression

Treatment for depression usually involves a combination of medicines, psychological therapies and self-help. The kind of treatment that your doctor recommends will be based on the type of depression you have. If your depression is mild or even if you have been diagnosed with moderate or severe depression, there are

measures you can take in addition to medication and therapy to help yourself recover. Moderate or severe depression will usually need to be assessed and monitored by your general practitioner or by a psychiatrist.

Treatment may include:

- *Exercise*

Exercise has been proven to help depression, and is one of the main treatments if you have mild depression.

- *Psychological therapies*

If you have mild depression that isn't improving, or you have moderate depression, your doctor may recommend a psychotherapist. There are different types of therapy for depression, which include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and psychodynamic orientated therapies.

- *Antidepressants*

Antidepressants are tablets that treat the symptoms of depression and that must be prescribed by a doctor. There are many different types of antidepressants and your doctor will need to choose the one that is best suited to you and your illness.

- *Combination therapy*

A combination of an antidepressant and CBT usually works better than having just one of these treatments.

Living with depression

There are some key steps you can take to lift your mood and help your recovery from depression.

- *Take your medication*

It is important to take your medication as prescribed, even if you start to feel better. If you stop your medication too soon, you could have a relapse of your depression. If you have any questions or concerns about the medication you're taking, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

It may help to read the information leaflet that comes with your medication to find out about possible interactions with other drugs or supplements. Check with your doctor first if you plan to take any over-the-counter remedies, such as painkillers, or any nutritional supplements. These can sometimes interfere with antidepressants.

○ *Exercise and diet*

Exercise and a healthy diet can make a tremendous difference to how quickly you recover from depression. And they will both improve your general health, too. Research suggests that exercise can be as effective as antidepressants at reducing depression symptoms. Being physically active lifts your mood, reduces stress and anxiety, boosts the release of endorphins (your body's feel-good chemicals) and improves your self-esteem.

It also helps your mood to have a healthy diet. In fact, eating healthily seems to be just as important for maintaining your mental health as it is for preventing physical health problems.

○ *Keep a routine*

No matter how difficult it is, it is very important to keep to a daily routine and to maintain contact with a few family members and friends. Depression makes everything in your life seem dull and dark, and it is very important to maintain contact with people who are not depressed. It is also vital to get up and achieve something every day, even if it is just the simple act of caring for your own personal hygiene.

Preventing relapse

Once you are well again, it is important to take measures to try to prevent yourself from becoming depressed again. For some people this means taking an antidepressant or mood stabiliser for many years, but for many people simple lifestyle measures will go a long way towards preventing further depressive episodes. These measures include regular exercise, a healthy varied diet which includes sufficient quantities of omega 3 oils (in oily fish and certain seeds) and vitamin D, getting enough sleep and having regular 'down' time for relaxation.

A healthy social and family life are also very important in the prevention of depression, and participation in a church group or other group activities can also provide you with the support needed to get through stressful life events without relapsing.

Most importantly, you must remember that depression is episodic and treatable. No matter how black things may appear at the time, it will pass and life will appear brighter in future.