

What Is Depression?

Everyone sometimes feels blue or sad. But these feelings are usually short-lived and pass within a couple of days. When you have depression, it affects daily life. It can cause pain for both you and those who care about you. Depression is a common but serious illness.

Many people with depression never seek treatment. But most, even those with the most severe depression, can get better with treatment. Medications, psychotherapies (or “talk therapy”) and other methods can treat people with depression.

There are many forms of depression.

- **Major depressive disorder**, or major depression, is a mixture of symptoms that affects a person’s ability to work, sleep, study, eat and enjoy once-enjoyable activities. Major depression can stop a person from living his or her normal life if not treated. Some people may have only a single episode within their lifetimes. Often a person may have many episodes.
- **Dysthymic disorder, or dysthymia**, is when a person has long-term (2 years or longer) depression. It may not be severe enough to disable a person. Still, it can stop the person from doing usual activities or from feeling well. People with dysthymia may also experience one or more episodes of major depression during their lifetimes.
- **Minor depression** is when a person has symptoms for 2 weeks or longer that do not meet the definition for major depression. Without treatment, people with minor depression are at risk for getting worse.

Some forms of depression are slightly different, or happen for different reasons. They include:

- **Postpartum depression**, which women may have after giving birth. It is much more serious than the “baby blues” that many women have after giving birth. “Baby blues” is when hormones cause changes in the body. The new duties of caring for a newborn can be hard. It is estimated that 10 to 15 percent of women have postpartum depression after giving birth.
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** is when depression happens during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight. The depression generally lifts during spring and summer. SAD may be treated with light therapy. But, nearly half of those with SAD do not get better with light therapy alone. Antidepressant medication and talk therapy can lower SAD symptoms, either by themselves or with light therapy.

Sometimes a person will report feelings of sadness to his or her doctor and the doctor will treat him or her for depression. Later, the person may report feeling very excited and overly happy. The doctor might change that person's diagnosis and treat him or her for bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is not as common as depression and usually takes time for the doctor to identify. Bipolar disorder usually appears in the late teens or early adult years and the person has mood swings. A mood swing is feeling very good and then quickly feeling sad. The doctor will treat this illness with a different medication than he or she would suggest for depression.

Causes

Most likely, depression is caused by a mix of your genes, your life situations, where you live and your emotions. Some types of depression tend to run in families. But depression can occur in people without family histories of depression, too. Scientists are studying certain genes that may make some people more likely to get depressed. Also, trauma, loss of a loved one, a difficult relationship or any stressful situation may cause an episode of depression. Others may occur with or without an obvious trigger.

Signs and symptoms

The signs of depression are different for each person. Many people say it is hard to get out of bed in the morning or they just want to hide under the covers and not talk to anyone. Some say they don't feel like eating, and then they lose some weight. Some say that nothing seems fun anymore. Most people feel tired all the time and they don't sleep well at night. They may have to push themselves to take care of themselves or their children. Sometimes a person can feel hopeless, like nothing is going to change or get better.

People with depressive illnesses do not all have the same symptoms. How severe, how often symptoms occur and how long the symptoms last vary depending on the person and his or her illness.

Signs and symptoms include:

- Ongoing sadness, anxiousness or "empty" feelings.
- Feelings of hopelessness or negativity.
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness.
- Irritability or restlessness.
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies that used to be fun.
- Being tired and having low energy.
- Finding it hard to concentrate, remember details and make decisions.
- Poor sleep, early-morning waking or sleeping too much.
- Eating too much, or not enough.
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts.
- Aches and pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment.

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