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Patient information: Depression in adults (Beyond the Basics)

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DEPRESSION OVERVIEW

Depression is a medical condition that can cause a wide variety of psychological and physical symptoms. Extreme sadness is often the most pronounced symptom. Some people experience loss of interests or pleasure rather than sadness. Depression can be distinguished from occasional blues and grief because depression is persistent, often interfering with daily activities and relationships.

In the past, depression was poorly understood and carried an unfortunate social stigma. However, depression occurs commonly; the risk of suffering from a major depressive episode at some time during a person's life is up to 12 percent for men and 25 percent for women. The condition can affect people of all ages, including children and older adults.

Depression is a treatable condition. Psychotherapy (counseling), drug therapy, and other treatments can alleviate symptoms and help people with depression return to rich and productive lives. Treatment is most successful in people who are open to being helped and willing to participate in treatment.

This article discusses the causes, risk factors, signs and symptoms, and diagnosis of depression. A separate article discusses the treatment of depression. (See "[Patient information: Depression treatment options for adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

More detailed information about depression is available by subscription. (See "[Clinical manifestations and diagnosis of depression](#)" and "[Diagnosis and management of late-life depression](#)" and "[Initial treatment of depression in adults](#)" and "[Treatment of resistant depression in adults](#)".)

Articles that discuss depression in adolescents are available separately. (See "[Patient information: Depression in adolescents \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)" and "[Patient information: Depression treatment options for adolescents \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

DEPRESSION CAUSES

Research has helped clarify the complex biologic basis of depression, although the exact cause of depression is still uncertain. Studies suggest that depression is accompanied by changes in neurochemicals in the brain, including serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine. These neurochemicals allow cells to communicate with each other and play an essential role in all brain functions, including movement, sensation, memory, and emotions. That depression affects the brain is supported by the results of genetic studies and the response of depression to drug therapy and other therapies that alter levels of brain neurochemicals.

In addition, social factors may be involved, including isolation and criticism from family members. Psychological factors include repeated negative thoughts (for example, "I'm no good," "The future is hopeless," or "There is nothing I can do"). Losses and interpersonal problems may also contribute to onset of depression.

DEPRESSION RISK FACTORS

Although anyone can develop depression, certain factors increase a person's risk for this condition, including:

- Female sex
- A history of depression in a parent, sibling, or child
- A prior episode of major depression

Other factors have been identified as secondary (weaker) risk factors for depression:

- A history of depression in a family member who is not a parent, sibling, or child
- Lack of social supports
- Significant stressful life events
- Current alcohol or substance abuse

Depression and other medical conditions — Many people with chronic medical or neurological disorders, as well as some people with short term conditions, have difficulty with depression. The number of people with depression may be particularly high in diseases of the brain (eg, stroke, traumatic brain injury, Parkinson disease), heart conditions, cancer, and conditions that affect the immune system (eg, lupus).

The risk of depression is not related to any specific disease or organ system. However, depression can worsen the outcome of many conditions, and even increases the risk of death from medical causes as well as suicide. This may be related to the fact that some people with depression are not motivated to take their medications on schedule, attend medical appointments, and/or exercise.

Fortunately, recognizing and treating depression can improve a person's sense of health and well-being, and can also improve a person's interest in caring for him or herself.

DEPRESSION SYMPTOMS/DEFINITIONS

Extreme sadness may be the best known symptom of depression, although depression also includes other psychological and physical symptoms. The hallmark of depression is that symptoms are persistent and interfere with daily activities and relationships.

Unfortunately, there is no single sign or symptom that serves as a marker for depression, and the condition can be tricky to identify. In fact, many people do not recognize that they are depressed or that their physical symptoms (aches and pain, appetite and sleep changes) are related to depression. One study revealed that 29 percent of people visiting their doctors for a physical symptom had a depressive disorder or an anxiety disorder [1].

The symptoms of the three types of depression (major depression, dysthymia, and atypical depression) will be discussed here.

Major depression — Major depression is the medical term for depression that includes five of the symptoms listed below. A person can have mild, moderate, or severe major depression.

