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Patient information: Depression in adolescents (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. It is estimated that between 4 and 8 percent of adolescents are depressed. However, depression in adolescents is probably underdiagnosed because the symptoms can be difficult to recognize.

Extreme and enduring sadness is the best-known symptom of depression, although adolescents can have a number of other symptoms, including irritability, difficulty at school, changes in sleep habits, and/or feelings of worthlessness. Depression is different than occasional blues and grief because depression is persistent and often interferes with the teen's ability to get along with parents and friends, complete school work, and appropriately participate in other normal daily activities.

Depression is a treatable condition. Psychotherapy (counseling), drug therapy, and other measures can alleviate symptoms and help the adolescent to succeed in school, develop and maintain healthy relationships, and feel more self-confident. This topic review discusses the causes, risk factors, signs and symptoms, and diagnosis of depression in adolescents. A separate topic review discusses the treatment of depression in adolescents. (See "[Patient information: Depression treatment options for adolescents \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

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

CAUSE OF DEPRESSION

The exact cause of depression is not known. Studies suggest that depression is a biologic disorder resulting, at least in part, from an imbalance of neurochemicals in the brain, including serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine. These neurochemicals allow cells in the brain to communicate with each other and play an essential role in all brain functions, including movement, sensation, memory, and emotions. This interaction is supported by studies demonstrating the benefit of antidepressants, which help restore the neurochemical balance in the brain.

DEPRESSION RISK FACTORS

Many adolescents are unsure why they are depressed. Depression sometimes occurs in response to a stressful event, such as a recent death or break-up, or it can occur for no apparent reason. Although

anyone can develop depression, certain factors increase an adolescent's risk for becoming depressed, including:

- Female sex
- A history of depression in a parent or sibling
- A prior history of depression
- A history of anxiety disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disability
- A recent loss (eg, death, divorce)
- Family problems or conflicts with parents
- Difficulties with friends or peers
- Difficulties with school work
- Negative outlook or poor coping skills
- Chronic illness

IMPACT OF DEPRESSION

Many adolescents who are depressed are not aware that depression is the basis for the changes in their emotions, ability to interact with others, and school performance. These changes can have serious, life-altering consequences that increase the risk for future depressive episodes, especially if the depression is not recognized or treated. Adolescents who are depressed are at increased risk for the following problems:

- Difficulty with school work and relationships with parents and peers, decreased interest and involvement in daily activities and responsibilities.
- Health complaints such as abdominal pain, fatigue, and headaches.
- Engaging in high-risk behaviors such as having sex, smoking, abusing alcohol and other substances, violence against others, and suicide attempts.

Preventing suicide — Suicide is a tragic and preventable consequence of severe depression. Any mention of suicide or self-harm should be taken seriously. Signs that a teen is considering suicide include the following [1]:

- Ideation — Talking about or threatening to kill or hurt oneself; looking for ways to kill oneself; talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Substance abuse — Increased substance use
- Purposelessness
- Anxiety — Anxiety, agitation, or changes in sleep pattern
- Trapped — Feeling like there is no way out
- Hopelessness
- Withdrawal — Withdrawing from friends, family, and society
- Anger
- Recklessness
- Mood changes

Parents who are concerned that their child is considering suicide should seek care as soon as possible. If the parent is concerned that the child is at risk of hurting him or herself or others, the parent should do one of the following:

