

## Depression

### What is depression?

Depression is:

- ? feeling sad and "blue"
- ? not being interested in things that normally bring pleasure
- ? having negative or gloomy thoughts.

Depression is called clinical and is more severe when other symptoms involving both body and mind also occur. These symptoms include changes in:

- ? sleep
- ? appetite
- ? the ability to concentrate
- ? energy level
- ? sex drive.

The symptoms of clinical depression make it hard for you to function normally. It lasts for at least 2 weeks and, without treatment, usually much longer.

### How does it occur?

Changes in mood marked by feeling sad, hopeless, and worthless may occur with:

- ? a major depressive disorder or a chronic, milder depressive disorder
- ? a complication of another mental or medical illness
- ? a reaction to a medication or drug
- ? biochemical changes in the body (for example, after childbirth or major surgery)
- ? alcohol or drug abuse.

The exact cause of depression is unknown. It appears to result from a biochemical imbalance in certain parts of the brain. In many cases it appears to run in families.

Some people have a greater risk of depression, including those who:

- ? have a family history of anxiety, depression, or bipolar disorder
- ? are anxious
- ? are alcoholics
- ? are drug addicts.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of major depression include having at least one of the two following symptoms most of the day every day for more than 2 weeks:

- ? feeling sad or blue (may include crying spells or being anxious, agitated, or irritable)
- ? loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities.

In addition, major depression involves having at least four of the following symptoms:

- ? poor appetite and significant weight loss, or increased appetite and significant weight gain
- ? inability to sleep, increase in time spent sleeping, or trouble sleeping soundly
- ? fatigue, loss of energy
- ? agitation and restlessness
- ? decreased sex drive
- ? feelings of self-reproach or guilt that are not appropriate
- ? trouble thinking clearly or concentrating

- ? memory problems
- ? thoughts of death or suicide or actual suicide plans or attempts.

Depressed people have a hard time maintaining normal relationships. As a result, problems with relating to others often develop or worsen.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

To diagnose depression, your doctor reviews your symptoms with you and sometimes with someone close to you. He or she may also examine you. In addition, the doctor will try to find out whether drug or alcohol abuse or a medical illness may be adding to your depression.

### **How is it treated?**

It is unwise to try to overcome depression by yourself. Depression is usually most successfully treated with psychotherapy and antidepressant medicine.

Psychotherapy can provide support and help you feel less like you are out of control, a victim, or going crazy. One approach used to treat depression is called cognitive therapy. This therapy usually lasts 12 to 20 weeks. During counseling sessions, the therapist can help you identify views of yourself, the world, and the future that are not realistic. The therapy can help you recognize depressive thought processes and develop thought and behavior patterns that counteract depressive thought.

Antidepressant medicines may not relieve your symptoms until 3 to 6 weeks after you start taking them. After an antidepressant has treated the symptoms of depression, you should continue to take the medication for at least 6 to 9 months to prevent a recurrence. It is important to keep taking your medication at the prescribed dose, even after symptoms go away, and not to stop until you and your doctor decide that it is time to do so. When it is time to stop taking the medication, it is usually necessary to reduce the dosage gradually, rather than to suddenly stop taking it. Reducing the dosage over time helps avoid side effects. If you have depression that keeps coming back or doesn't go away, you may need to continue to take antidepressants.

There are many types of antidepressants. They are not addictive.

It is usually not necessary to stay in the hospital if treatment is started soon enough. Staying in the hospital might be advised if:

- ? The risk of suicide is high.
- ? Your home life is so stressful or disordered that it is making the depression worse.
- ? You are unable to take care of yourself at home.

In cases of severe or long-lasting depression, especially if medication has not worked, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT, also called shock therapy) may be a very effective part of the treatment. While ECT has been made out to be something bad in the movies, it is more likely than drug therapy to be helpful and is safer. Because it brings relief much more quickly, ECT may be the treatment of choice for people with psychotic depression or for people who are severely suicidal.

### **How long will the effects last?**

Without treatment, most episodes of depression end within 6 to 12 months. However, these episodes often recur and some may last much longer. Psychotherapy and antidepressants should help you feel better within a few weeks. Depression often recurs, however, even with treatment. If the symptoms of depression return, call your therapist or doctor at once.

You may have some side effects from antidepressants, but most are not severe or bothersome. Tell your doctor about any side effects so he or she can work with you to keep them to a minimum.

### **How can I take care of myself?**



Follow the treatment your doctor advises, including taking any prescribed antidepressants and counseling. Also, you can:

- ? Learn which activities make you feel somewhat better and try to focus on them. Do things for yourself. Take part in activities even when you may not want to.
- ? Do not withdraw from others. Join a support group and talk to your family and friends. Call on your support group or therapist for help when you need it. Ask for help at home and at work if the load is too great to handle.
- ? Eat healthy, well-balanced meals. Avoid drinking alcohol or using illegal drugs.
- ? Exercise several times a week.

- ? Get enough rest and keep your sleep pattern as regular as possible.
- ? Do relaxation exercises daily and breathing exercises during times of high stress.
- ? Think often about the good things that have happened to you. Develop and maintain an attitude that things will work out.
- ? Learn new, positive skills for solving problems.
- ? Call your doctor or therapist if you feel suicidal.

Certain medications such as reserpine, birth control pills, benzodiazepines, digitalis, and possibly beta-adrenergic blockers can add to the symptoms of depression. If you have been or are being treated for depression, it is important to check with your doctor before taking any new medications, either nonprescription drugs or drugs prescribed by other doctors.

You may wish to contact the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association (NDMDA) or the National Mental Health Association (NMHA).

- ? NDMDA's toll-free information line number is 1-800-82-NDMDA. NDMDA's website address is <http://www.ndmda.org> .
- ? NMHA's toll-free Information Center number is 1-800-969-NMHA. NMHA's website address is <http://www.NMHA.org> .