

What is depression?

Everyone feels low sometimes, but these feelings usually pass after a few days. When you have depression, the low feelings persist and they can be intense. These low feelings hurt your ability to do the things that make up daily life for weeks at a time. Depression is a serious illness that needs treatment.

What are the different forms of depression?

The most common types of depression are:

Major depression—severe symptoms that interfere with your ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy life. An episode can occur only once in a person's lifetime, but more often, a person has several episodes.

Persistent depressive disorder—depressed mood that lasts for at least 2 years. A person diagnosed with persistent depressive disorder may have episodes of major depression along with periods of less severe symptoms, but symptoms must last for 2 years.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

Different people have different symptoms. Some symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad or “empty”
- Feeling hopeless, irritable, anxious, or guilty
- Loss of interest in favorite activities
- Feeling very tired
- Not being able to concentrate or remember details
- Not being able to sleep, or sleeping too much
- Overeating, or not wanting to eat at all
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems.

What causes depression?

Different kinds of factors play a role in the risk of depression. Depression tends to run in families. One of the reasons for this has to do with genes. Some genes increase the risk of depression. Others increase resilience—the ability to recover from hardship—and protect against depression. Experiences such as trauma

or abuse during childhood and stress during adulthood can raise risk. However, the same stresses or losses may trigger depression in one person and not another. Factors such as a warm family and healthy social connections can increase resilience.

Research has shown that in people with depression, there can be subtle changes in the brain systems involved in mood, energy, and thinking and how the brain responds to stress. The changes may differ from person to person, so that a treatment that works for one person may not work for another.

Does depression look the same in everyone?

No. Depression affects different people in different ways.

Women experience depression more often than men. Biological, life cycle, and hormonal factors that are unique to women may be linked to women's higher depression rate. Women with depression typically have symptoms of sadness, worthlessness, and guilt.

Men with depression are more likely to be very tired, irritable, and sometimes even angry. They may lose interest in work or activities they once enjoyed, and have sleep problems.

Older adults with depression may have less obvious symptoms, or they may be less likely to admit to feelings of sadness or grief. They also are more likely to have medical conditions like heart disease or stroke, which may cause or contribute to depression. Certain medications also can have side effects that contribute to depression.

Children with depression may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent, or worry that a parent may die. Older children or teens may get into trouble at school and be irritable. Because these signs can also be part of normal mood swings associated with certain childhood stages, it may be difficult to accurately diagnose a young person with depression.

How is depression treated?

The first step to getting the right treatment is to visit a doctor or mental health professional. He or she can do an exam or lab tests to rule out other conditions that may have the same symptoms as depression. He or she can also tell if certain medications you are taking may be affecting your mood.

The doctor should get a complete history of symptoms, including when they started, how long they have lasted, and how bad they are. He or she should also know whether they have occurred before, and if so, how they were treated. He or she should also ask if there is a history of depression in your family.

Medications called antidepressants can work well to treat depression. They can take several weeks to work. Antidepressants can have side effects including:

- Headache
- Nausea—feeling sick to your stomach
- Difficulty sleeping or nervousness
- Agitation or restlessness
- Sexual problems.

Most side effects lessen over time. **Talk to your doctor about any side effects you have.**

It's important to know that although antidepressants can be safe and effective for many people, they may present serious risks to some, especially children, teens, and young adults. A “black box”—the most serious type of warning that a prescription drug can have—has been added to the labels of antidepressant medications. These labels warn people that antidepressants may cause some people, especially those who become agitated when they first start taking the medication and before it begins to work, to have suicidal thoughts or make suicide attempts. Anyone taking antidepressants should be monitored closely, especially when they first start taking them. For most people, though, the risks of untreated depression far outweigh those of antidepressant medications when they are used under a doctor's careful supervision.

Psychotherapy can also help treat depression. Psychotherapy helps by teaching new ways of thinking and behaving, and changing habits that may be contributing to the depression. Therapy can help you understand and work through difficult relationships or situations that may be causing your depression or making it worse.

Researchers are developing new ways to treat depression more quickly and effectively. For more information on research on depression, visit the **NIMH website** at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>.