

Understanding depression



It's not unusual to feel down in the dumps once in a while — many times, those feelings pass within a couple days. But if feelings of sadness last longer than two weeks, you may be suffering from depression. In this case, it's important you talk with your doctor. The good news is that depression can be successfully treated.

What is depression?

Depression is a common, but serious condition that affects how you think and feel. It can also be associated with physical symptoms. About one in 15 people every year suffer from it — that's about 16 million people in all. Depression can range from mild to severe, and symptoms can vary by each person.

What causes it?

Depression can happen without a direct cause, but the following factors may contribute to the risk of developing it:

- **Medical conditions.** Managing a condition and dealing with changes in your lifestyle habits, activity level or independence can cause feelings of sadness and depression.
- **Trauma.** Experiencing trauma at a young age can affect how one reacts to stressors, which may cause depression.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse.** About 30 percent of people who have issues with addiction also suffer from depression.
- **Chemical imbalances.** Certain chemicals in a person's brain may influence their risk of depression.
- **Family history.** If someone in your family has had depression, you may be more susceptible to it.

What are the signs?

If you're depressed, you may not want to be with people — you may even start to isolate yourself. This kind of withdrawal can cause pain and may affect those around you.

Here are a few other common symptoms of depression:

- Significant changes in sleeping patterns or appetite
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Feeling sad, hopeless, pessimistic, guilty or helpless
- Becoming easily fatigued or restless

Sources

National Institute of Mental Health. Depression.nimh.nih. Accessed: November 16, 2017.
American Psychiatric Association. What is depression? Accessed: November 16, 2017.
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Depression. Accessed: November 16, 2017.
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- Having difficulty concentrating or making a decision
- Experiencing thoughts of death or suicide*

Depression can be different from person to person. If your symptoms are severe or have lasted longer than two weeks, it's time to speak with your doctor.

Reach out for help.

Your first step should be to talk with your doctor. Your doctor will perform a full evaluation with a history and physical examination. As some medications or medical conditions can cause symptoms similar to depression, your doctor may also order lab tests to help rule out other conditions. Based on the results of your examination and any other tests your doctor may have ordered, your doctor may recommend psychotherapy, medications or other types of treatments.

Stay connected and be patient.

In addition to any recommended treatments, try to be active and get some exercise as recommended by your doctor. Be around other people. Talk to those you trust and ask for support, too. But don't expect your energy and positive outlook to necessarily pop back into place right away. That should return over time, as you get the help you need. Also, if your doctor prescribed medication for depression, keep in mind it may take weeks to work, and sometimes different medications need to be prescribed. If you're concerned your medication is not helping, talk to your doctor.

*If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, call your health care professional, 911 or a suicide hotline such as 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433). Or have someone drive you to your nearest emergency department. If you feel that you are in immediate danger of hurting yourself or others, call 911 or your local emergency services immediately.

Speak with a master's-level counselor 24 hours a day.

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