



Depression

Signs, Symptoms and Risk Factors

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What Is Depression?

We all go through ups and downs in our mood. Sadness is a normal reaction to life’s struggles, setbacks, and disappointments. We may feel “down in the dumps” for a short period of time, but gradually the painful feelings dissipate and we move on with our lives—often the wiser for the experience. But if these feelings of sadness don't go away, if they last for more than 2 weeks, or if they are so intense that they interfere with your ability to work, study, eat, sleep, and enjoy life, you may be suffering from depression.

What Are The Signs And Symptoms Of Depression?

More than just temporary blue mood, the despondency of depression is unrelenting and overwhelming. Some people describe it as “living in a black hole” or having a feeling of impending doom. They can't escape their unhappiness and despair. However, some people with depression don't feel depressed at all. Rather than sad, they feel lifeless and empty. In this apathetic state, they are unable to experience pleasure. Even when participating in activities they used to enjoy, they feel as if they're just “going through the motions.”

The symptoms vary from person to person, and they may vary in severity over time.

Symptoms of Depression

Depressed mood	Feeling helplessness/hopeless, sad, discouraged, or empty.
Loss of interest or pleasure	Inability to experience pleasure. Nothing seems to interest you anymore, including former hobbies, social activities, and sex.
Appetite or weight changes	Significant weight loss or weight gain—a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month.
Sleep changes	Insomnia, particularly waking during the night and early in th morning or oversleeping (also known as hypersomnia).
Psychomotor agitation or retardation	“Keyed up,” unable to sit still, anxious, restless or sluggish, slow speech and body movements, lack of responsiveness.
Fatigue or loss of energy	Physically drained. Even small tasks are exhausting. Can't do things as quickly as you used to.
Self-loathing	Strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt. Harsh criticism of perceived faults and mistakes.
Concentration problems	Inability to focus. Difficulty making decisions. Can't “think straight.” Memory problems.
Irritability	Grouchy, easily annoyed, and frustrated by little things. Angry outbursts.
Aches and pains	Depression can cause or exacerbate many physical symptoms, including headaches, backaches, diarrhea or constipation, abdominal pain, and aching joints.

People suffering from depression often show distorted thinking. Everything looks bleak to them, and they hold extremely negative views about themselves, their situation, and the future. Trapped in their pessimism, they brood/obsess over their problems and blow them out of proportion. Feeling hopeless and helpless, they may even start to see suicide as their only way out.

Thoughts of Death or Suicide

Suicidal thoughts are a symptom of severe depression, and must always be taken seriously. If someone you know is threatening suicide or talking of wanting to hurt him/herself, seek professional help right away

If you are considering suicide you should talk to someone, contact your GP, health professional or phone the Samaritans NOW 1850 609090

How Do The Signs And Symptoms Of Depression Differ In Different Groups?

Depression is expressed differently according to one's age, sex, and culture. For example, a teenager is unlikely to exhibit the same signs of depression as an elderly person would. An awareness of these differences helps ensure that the problem is recognised and treated.

Teen Depression

Depression in children and adolescents can look quite distinct from that of adults. Irritability—rather than depression—is frequently the predominant mood. A depressed child or teenager may be hostile, grumpy, or easily lose his or her temper. Unexplained aches and pains, such as headaches and stomach-aches, is also a common symptom of depression in children and teens. Other signs include pretending to be sick, refusing to go to school, getting into trouble, clinging to a parent, or worrying that the parent may die.

Depression in Women

Rates of depression in women are twice as high as they are in men. This is due in part to hormonal factors, particularly when it comes to premenstrual syndrome (PMS), premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). When it comes to symptoms, women are more likely than men to experience pronounced feelings of guilt, sleep excessively, overeat, and gain weight. Women are also more likely to suffer from seasonal affective disorder.

Depression in Men

Depressed men are less likely than women to acknowledge feelings of self-loathing and hopelessness. Instead, they tend to complain about fatigue, irritability, sleep problems, and loss of interest in work and hobbies. Other symptoms of depression in men include anger, aggression and violence, reckless behaviour, and substance abuse. Men may also try to cope with their depression by throwing themselves into their work. In young males anti-social behaviour may be a symptom of depression.

Depression in Older Adults and the Elderly

The difficult changes that many older adults face—such as bereavement, loss of independence, and health problems—can lead to depression, especially in those without a strong support system. However, depression is not a normal part of ageing. Older adults tend to complain more about the physical rather than the emotional symptoms of depression, and so their mood disorder often goes unrecognised. But depression in the elderly is associated with poor health, a high mortality rate, and an increased risk of suicide, so diagnosis and treatment are extremely important.

What Are The Different Types Of Depression And Their Symptoms?

There are several different types of depressive disorders. Many of the symptoms overlap, but each type of depression has distinct signs and effects.

Major Depression

Major depression is characterised by a persistent sad mood and/or an inability to experience pleasure. These symptoms are constant, interfering with the ability to lead a productive and enjoyable life. Left untreated, a major depressive episode typically lasts for about six months. Some people may experience just a single episode of depression in their lifetime, but more commonly, major depression is a recurring disorder.

Atypical Depression

Atypical depression is a common subtype of major depression. It features a specific symptom pattern, including a temporary mood lift in response to positive events. You may feel better after receiving good news or while out with friends. However, this boost in mood is fleeting. Other symptoms of atypical depression include weight gain or significant increase in appetite, sleeping excessively, a heavy feeling in the arms and legs, and sensitivity to rejection. Depression may manifest itself as symptoms of physical illness for which no underlying cause can be found.

Dysthymia

Dysthymia, or dysthymic disorder, is a type of “low-grade” depression that lasts for at least two years. Dysthymia is less severe than major depression, but the chronic symptoms prevent one from leading life to the fullest. If you have dysthymic disorder, you are mildly to moderately depressed on more days than not, although you may have brief periods of normal mood. Many people with dysthymia also experience major depressive episodes, a condition known as “double depression”.

Bipolar Disorder or Manic Depression

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is characterised by mood swings, with episodes of depression alternating with episodes of mania which are characterised by elevation of mood, euphoria and often irritability. Typically, the switch from one mood extreme to the other is gradual, with each manic or depressive episode lasting for at least several weeks. When depressed, a person with bipolar disorder exhibits the usual symptoms of major depression. In the manic phase, symptoms include hyperactivity, rapid speech, and impulsive behaviour.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Some people who experience recurring episodes of depression show a seasonal pattern known as (SAD). SAD is a major depression that occurs in the autumn or winter when the amount of sunlight is limited. In SAD, the depression goes away once the seasons turn again in the spring. SAD is more common in northern climates and in younger people.

Postpartum Depression

Many new mothers suffer from some fleeting form of the “baby blues.” Postpartum depression, in contrast, is a longer lasting and more serious depression thought to be triggered by hormonal changes associated with having a baby. Postpartum depression usually develops soon after delivery, but any depression that occurs within six months of childbirth may be postpartum depression.

What Are The Causes Of Depression?

There is no single cause of depression. Early life experience, genetic predisposition, lifestyle factors, and certain personality traits all play a part in causing depression. Something that causes depression in one person may have no effect on another. Feeling connected to people in our daily lives makes an enormous difference in our ability to surmount stress that might trigger depression. Individuals who feel unknown or unseen, or who avoid the support and comfort of others, are at risk for depression and depressive disorders.

What Are The Risk Factors For Depression?

Lack of social support	Social support serves as a protective factor against depression. People who are isolated and have few friends or family members to turn to in times of stress are more likely to develop depression.
Recent stressful life experience	When people are going through stressful experiences that overwhelm their coping skills, depression often results. Relationship, family, and career difficulties
Previous history of depression	If you’ve had an episode of major depression before, you are at increased risk of having another episode. The probability of having a recurrence increases with each major depressive episode.
Family history of depression	If depression runs in your family, your risk for depression is higher. Your risk is particularly high if one of your close relatives, such as parent or sibling, has depression.
Lower socio-economic status	Research has shown that low socioeconomic status is associated with increased rates of depression. People with lower levels of income, education, and occupational status face many obstacles and stressors that likely contribute to this risk.
Underlying emotional or personality disorder	People with pervasive emotional difficulties or personality disorders are vulnerable to depression.
Chronic medical condition	Ongoing medical problems or chronic pain can lead to depression.
Female sex	Women are twice as likely to experience depression as men.
Advanced age	People over the age of 65 are more vulnerable to depression.



How Is Depression Treated?

There are many different treatment options for depression. The most common approach involves some type of psychotherapy, antidepressant medication, or a combination of the two.

Psychotherapy

In psychotherapy for depression, you are taught the facts about your depressive disorder and how to manage it. Working with a mental health professional, you will learn how to cope with negative feelings, identify and change distorted thinking patterns, improve your relationships with others, and deal with problems constructively. You may also explore the underlying causes of your depression. Talk therapy can be pursued in an individual, group, couples, or family setting.

Antidepressant Medication

A variety of medications are used in the treatment of depression. Antidepressants typically take up to 4-6 weeks to reach their full effectiveness. Drug treatment may cause unwanted side effects, so educating yourself about your medication and its risks is important. Understanding the nature and natural history of depression are important aspects of treatment, the impact of life style on the course of the illness, physical exercise attention to diet and occupation all play an important part in the management of depression.

Resources

Irish Association of Suicidology
www.ias.ie

Samaritans
www.samaritans.org.uk

Aware
www.aware.ie

Mental Health Ireland
www.mentalhealthireland.ie

GROW
www.grow.ie

Data courtesy NIMH and Helpguide.org



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