



Depression

Fact:

Depression is a highly treatable illness.

Fiction:

It's a myth that depressed people can voluntarily "get it together."

Prevention:

Most depression risk factors can't be prevented.

Treatment:

Treatment involves therapy, medication or both.

Depression is highly treatable, but if left untreated, can cause needless pain and suffering both to the person who is depressed and to friends and loved ones.

Understanding Depression

The two most common depressive disorders are:*

- Major depressive disorder (clinical depression), which causes a combination of symptoms that severely disrupt work, sleep, eating and enjoyment of activities. Disabling episodes of major depression affect 15% of Americans and can recur.
- Dysthymia (minor or chronic depression), which causes less intense, more persistent symptoms that may last for years. Usually, the disturbances in appetite or sexual drive, severe agitation, sedentary behavior and suicidal thoughts that may characterize major depression are not present in dysthymia. Dysthymia causes decreased energy, general negativity, and an overall sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness that pervades much of life. Almost 10 million Americans suffer from dysthymia each year.

Other types of depression include adjustment disorder, complicated grief and seasonal affective disorder.

Postpartum Depression

Two-thirds of all mothers experience hormonal changes after birth that make them especially sensitive. Nearly all new mothers are short on sleep and, at times, irritable and worried about their babies.

Some new mothers experience a more severe depression, called postpartum depression, which strikes any time within the first three months after childbirth. Symptoms include:*

- Intense sadness and hopelessness
- Sometimes feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Intensely anxious checking of the baby or phoning of the pediatrician

In rare cases, the mother becomes psychotic. She can't recognize reality and has hallucinations and delusions. This condition is extremely dangerous for both mother and baby.

Risks of postpartum depression increase if the mother has a history of depression, a troubled marriage, few supportive family members or friends and difficulty caring for the infant, especially if the child has serious medical problems.

Who Has Depression?

Depression can strike anyone, regardless of age, race, class or gender. Nearly 20 million Americans suffer from depression each year, but only one out of 10 seeks and receives adequate treatment. This is tragic, because the great majority of people with depression can recover fully.

Symptoms of Depression

Symptoms of depression include:*

- Persistent sad, anxious or empty mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening or oversleeping
- Significant change in appetite or body weight
- Decreased energy and fatigue
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness or irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain

For a child or adolescent, symptoms of depression also include performance problems in school and trouble with classmates.

Risks of depression increase with:*

- Stressful life events
- Deprivation early in life
- Severe or chronic illness. Depression is frequently unrecognized and goes untreated in these cases, although 60% of severely ill people are depressed
- Use of certain medications or combinations of medications
- Family history of depression
- Substance abuse

When a person has both depression and anxiety, the risk of suicide is greater.

Treatment

Some 80% to 90% of people with depression—even those with the severest cases—improve once they receive appropriate treatment.**

Depression is treated with therapy, medication or a combination of the two.

- Therapy helps the patient relieve symptoms, understand the disorder and finally recover from its effects. Therapy may make a difference in as little as one or two weeks.
- Antidepressant medication can relieve physical symptoms somewhat in one to two weeks, with the full effect of relief in some three to four more weeks.
- A combination of therapy and medication may be used.

* IntelliHealth

** The American Psychiatric Association

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