

Depression

Life is full of ups and downs, but if you feel sad, empty, or hopeless most of the time for at least two weeks or those feelings keep you from your regular activities, you may have depression. Depression is a serious mental health condition. Women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression. Depression is not a normal part of being a woman. Most women, even those with the most severe depression, can get better with treatment.

Q: What is depression?

A: Depression is a mental illness that can be diagnosed when someone feels sad (including crying often), or loses interest in or takes no pleasure in daily activities for at least two weeks. Depression affects a person's ability to work, go to school, or have relationships with friends and family. Depression is one of the most common mental health conditions in the United States. It is an illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts. It can affect the way you eat and sleep, feel about yourself, and think about things.

Q: What causes depression?

A: There is no single cause of depression. There are many reasons why a woman may have depression:

- **Family history.** Women with a family history of depression may be more at risk. But depression can also happen in women who don't have a family history of depression.
- **Brain changes.** The brains of people with depression look and function differently from those of people who don't have depression.
- **Chemistry.** In someone who has depression, parts of the brain that manage mood, thoughts, sleep, appetite, and behavior may not have the right balance of chemicals.

- **Hormone levels.** Changes in levels of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, postpartum period, perimenopause, or menopause may raise a woman's risk for depression. Having a miscarriage can also put a woman at higher risk for depression.
- **Stress.** Serious and stressful life events, or the combination of several stressful events, such as trauma, loss of a loved one, a bad relationship, work responsibilities, caring for children and aging parents, abuse, and poverty, may trigger depression in some people.
- **Medical problems.** Dealing with a serious health problem, such as stroke, heart attack, or cancer, can lead to depression. Research shows that people who have a serious illness and depression are more likely to have more serious types of both conditions. Some medical illnesses, like Parkinson's disease, hypothyroidism, and stroke, can cause changes in the brain that can trigger depression.
- **Pain.** Women who feel emotional or physical pain for long periods are much more likely to develop depression. The pain can come from a chronic (long-term) health problem, accident, or trauma such as sexual assault or abuse.

Q: What are the symptoms of depression?

A: Not all people with depression have the same symptoms. Some people might have only a few symptoms, while others may have many. How often symptoms happen, how long they last, and how severe they are may be different for each person.

If you have any of the following symptoms for at least two weeks, talk to a doctor or nurse or mental health professional:

- Feeling sad, “down,” or empty, including crying often
- Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, or useless
- Loss of interest in hobbies and activities that you once enjoyed
- Decreased energy
- Difficulty staying focused, remembering, or making decisions
- Sleeplessness, early morning awakening, or oversleeping and not wanting to get up
- Lack of appetite, leading to weight loss, or eating to feel better, leading to weight gain
- Thoughts of hurting yourself
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Feeling easily annoyed, bothered, or angered
- Constant physical symptoms that do not get better with treatment, such as headaches, upset stomach, and pain that doesn’t go away

Q: How is depression treated?

A: Your doctor or mental health professional may treat depression with therapy, medicine, or a combination of the two. Your doctor or nurse may refer you to a mental health specialist so that you can begin therapy.

Some people with milder forms of depression get better after treatment with therapy. People with moderate to severe depression might need a type of medicine called an antidepressant in addition to therapy. Antidepressants change the levels of certain chemicals in your brain. It may take a few weeks or months before you begin to feel a change in your mood. There are different types of antidepressant medicines, and some work better than others for certain people. Some people get better only with both treatments — therapy and antidepressants.

Q: What if I have thoughts of hurting myself?

A: If you are thinking about hurting or even killing yourself, **get help now**. Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

You might feel like your pain is too overwhelming to bear, but those feelings don’t last forever. People do make it through suicidal thoughts. Many thoughts of suicide are impulses that go away after a short period of time.

For more information...

For more information about depression, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or check out these resources from the following organizations:

MentalHealth.gov, HHS

www.MentalHealth.gov

National Institute of Mental Health, NIH, HHS

1-866-615-6464 • www.nimh.nih.gov

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, HHS

1-800-789-2647 • www.samhsa.gov

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

240-485-1001 • www.adaa.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness

1-800-950-6264 • www.nami.org



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