

Patient Handout - What is Depression ⁽¹⁰⁾

General Facts

Depression is a very common, yet highly treatable, medical illness that can affect anyone. About 1 of every 20 Americans get depressed every year. Depression is not a character flaw, nor is it a sign of personal weakness. Depression is a treatable medical illness. Unfortunately, many persons with depression do not tell their doctor how they are feeling. This is very regrettable since effective treatments are available for depression, and most people with depression can begin to feel better in several weeks when they are adequately treated. Talking with a doctor about how they are feeling is the depressed person's first important step toward getting better.

What is Depression?

Depression isn't just feeling "down in the dumps". It is more than feeling sad following a loss or hassled by hard times. Depression is a medical disorder (just like diabetes and high blood pressure are medical disorders) that affects your thoughts, feelings, physical health and behaviors. People with major depression experience a number of symptoms all day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks. Symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad, blue, or down in the dumps
- Loss of interest in things you usually enjoy
- Feeling slowed down or restless
- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Loss of energy or feeling tired all the time
- Having an increase or decrease in appetite or weight
- Having problems concentrating, thinking, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Having thoughts of death or suicide

If I'm Depressed, What Can Be Done About It?

The good news is that depression is treatable. Your primary care doctor can effectively treat depression by supportive counseling, prescribing an antidepressant medication and/or referring depressed persons to a mental health professional for counseling. Talking with your doctor about how you are feeling is a very important first step. You can further help your doctor treat you most effectively by participating actively in treatment by (a) asking questions and (b) following through with the treatment that both you and your doctor decide is best for you.

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Patient Handout - Persons Considering Medication Treatment For Depression ⁽¹⁰⁾

Quick Facts About Antidepressant Medications

- Antidepressant medications work by helping to correct an imbalance of chemicals in the brain.
- *Antidepressant medications are not addictive or habit forming; they are not uppers, and they are not tranquilizers.*

Treating Depression with Antidepressant Medications

Your doctor will consider several factors in selecting an appropriate antidepressant medication for you from the many that are available. Most people respond well to medication. It may take time for you and your doctor to find the medication that works best for you with the least number of side effects. Antidepressant medications are started at low doses to allow your body time to adapt; your doctor will then gradually increase the dose until you begin to feel better. After about 3-6 weeks of taking antidepressant medications, most people with depression begin to feel more like their usual self.

It is very important that you continue to take the medication exactly as the doctor prescribed even if you feel better. For the first 6-8 weeks after you begin treatment, your doctor will want to see you often (possibly every week) to check how much and how often you take the medication, to watch for and address any side effects you may experience, and to see how the medication is working on your depression. If your depression is significantly improved after 12 weeks, you will continue taking the medication for an additional 4-9 months to prevent your depression from returning. People who have had 2 or more previous episodes of depression may need to continue taking their medication for longer periods.

What Can You Do to Help Your Doctor Treat Your Depression With Medication?

- Keep all of your appointments.
- Speak to your doctor about questions or concerns you have about the medication.
- Take the medication exactly as your doctor prescribes.
- Tell your doctor immediately about any side effects you have to the medication.
- Tell your doctor how the medication is working (e.g., whether you are feeling better or worse).

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Patient Handout - Frequently Asked Questions About Antidepressant Medication ^(10,11)

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How do antidepressants work?

Antidepressants help restore the correct balance of important chemicals (called neurotransmitters) in the brain that affect a person's mood.

Are antidepressants addictive?

No, absolutely not. Antidepressants are not addictive or habit-forming, and they do not provide a "high".

Will I get better if I take the antidepressant?

Between 50% and 80% of people with depression recover completely with an adequate trial of medication. If you do not feel better after taking an adequate trial of one antidepressant, there is an excellent chance that you will respond more favorably to a different antidepressant.

How long will the antidepressant medication take to work?

People with depression usually start to feel better after taking an antidepressant medication for two to six weeks. In many cases, sleep and appetite improve first. It may take a little longer for your mood and energy to improve. If the depression is not improved after about six weeks, your doctor may want to increase the dose of the medication you are taking or switch you to another antidepressant.

How long will I have to take the antidepressant?

Once you have completely recovered from your depressive episode, you should stay on the medication for another four to nine months to prevent your depression from returning. Some people who have had previous episodes of depression should stay on antidepressant medication for longer periods of time to prevent new episodes of depression.

What should I do if I forget to take a dose of the medication?

Do **not** take a double dose to correct for the dose you forgot without asking your doctor. Take your next dose at the regular time.

Should I drink alcohol when I'm taking an antidepressant medication?

Alcoholic beverages can produce side effects in some persons taking antidepressants. Therefore, if you intend to have any alcohol-containing drinks while taking antidepressants, it is important you discuss this with your physician.

Is it safe to take antidepressants with other medications?

In general, antidepressants can be taken safely with other medications. However, it is very important for you to tell your doctor exactly which other medications you are taking (including over-the-counter medications) so s/he can assure that there are no potentially dangerous interactions.

Can I stop taking the medication once I start feeling better?

No. You should not stop taking the medication without first talking with your doctor. If you stop taking the medication too soon, you would be at high risk for having your depression return. In addition, some medications must be stopped gradually to give your body time to adjust. In most cases, you should expect to continue taking the medication for four to nine months after all of your depressive symptoms have gone away. When the time is appropriate for you to stop taking the medication, your doctor will cut it back gradually to prevent your depression from coming right back.

My problem is inability to sleep. How can an antidepressant help with this?

In many cases, poor sleep is a by-product of major depression. Once the depression lifts, sleep often improves as well.

Antidepressants can help restore normal sleep, even in people who do not have major depression. They are advantageous over other sleeping pills in that they are not habit-forming, and they usually do not impair concentration or coordination.

I have a problem with pain. How can an antidepressant help with this?

Some antidepressants have been shown to be successful (even in the absence of major depression) in a number of pain conditions such as diabetic neuropathy, postherpetic neuralgia, and phantom limb pain. Antidepressants may also help restore normal sleep and 'reverse' a vicious cycle of pain and poor sleep.

I have low energy and feel tired a lot of the time. How can an antidepressant help with this?

Low energy and fatigue commonly occur in people with major depression. Once the depression improves, their energy starts to return as well. Antidepressants can help restore energy in patients who are depressed. With successful treatment, patients will feel less tired and more able to do their usual activities.

I have a lot of stress in my life. How can an antidepressant help with this?

Life stress can cause or worsen the symptoms of depression. The depression can then worsen the impact of stress (such as work stress, family problems, physical disabilities or financial worries) and your ability to cope with them. Treating depression can help some patients break out of this vicious circle.

My problem is anxiety or panic attacks, not depression. How can antidepressants help?

In many cases, anxiety is a by-product of depression. Once the depression lifts, the anxiety improves as well. Some antidepressant medications are also among the most effective medical treatments for anxiety disorders, including panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

Are there any dangerous side effects?

Side effects from antidepressants are usually mild. You should ask your doctor or depression clinical specialist (who will coordinate with your doctor) what to expect and what to do if you have a problem. In many cases, your body will get used to the medication and you won't be bothered with the side effect for long. In other cases, your doctor may suggest that you lower the dose, add another medication, or change to another antidepressant. If used properly, there are no dangerous or life-threatening side effects.