

# Depression in Older Adults

## What is depression?

Depression is a condition in which you feel sad, hopeless, and uninterested in daily life. The depression may keep you from doing everyday activities.

Depression can be mild to severe. It can last for a short time or a long time.

Depression is a common problem among older adults, but it is not a normal part of aging. In fact, studies show that older adults generally feel satisfied with their lives, even though they may have more medical problems. If you have depression, it's important to get treatment.

## What is the cause?

The exact cause of depression is not known. Possible causes include:

- The brain makes chemicals that affect thoughts, emotions, and actions. Without the right balance of these chemicals, there may be problems with the way you think, feel, or act. People with this disorder may have too little or too much of some of these chemicals.
- Depression disorders tend to run in families. It is not known if this is caused by genes passed from parent to child. It may also be that parents have a negative outlook, and children learn this behavior from the parents.
- Some medicines can cause depression or make it worse. These include some blood pressure medicines, sleeping pills, seizure medicines, and steroids such as prednisone.
- A major medical problem such as Alzheimer's disease or cancer increases your risk for depression. Life situations such as loss and loneliness may also cause depression.

## What are the symptoms?

Besides feeling sad and uninterested in things you usually enjoy, symptoms may include:

- Being irritable
- Having trouble falling asleep, waking up very early, or sleeping more than usual
- Noticing changes in your appetite and weight, either up or down
- Having low energy
- Losing interest in sex
- Feeling worthless and guilty
- Not being able to concentrate or remember things
- Having physical symptoms, such as headaches and joint pain

Depressed older people are more likely to complain of physical problems than of feeling sad, anxious, or hopeless. Tiredness, mood changes, sleepiness, and

memory problems may be side effects of medicines rather than symptoms of depression. Other medical conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, and Alzheimer's disease, can also cause similar symptoms.

## **How is it diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider or therapist will ask about your symptoms. He will make sure you do not have a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms.

## **How is it treated?**

Many older adults think that they are too old to get help, or that getting help is a sign of weakness. This is not true. Depression is a physical illness and rarely goes away by itself. Depression can be successfully treated with therapy, medicine, or both.

### **Medicine**

Several types of medicines can help. Your healthcare provider will work with you to select the best medicine. You may need to take more than one type of medicine.

### **Therapy**

Seeing a mental health therapist is helpful. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy that helps you identify and change thought processes. Replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones can help your depression.

### **Other treatments**

Diets rich in fruits and vegetables are recommended. A multivitamin and mineral supplement may also be recommended. Learning ways to relax may help. Yoga and meditation may also be helpful. You may want to talk with your healthcare provider about using these methods along with medicines and therapy.

Claims have been made that certain herbal and dietary products help control depression symptoms. Omega-3 fatty acids may help to reduce symptoms of depression. St. John's wort may help mild symptoms of depression. It will not help severe cases of depression. No herb or dietary supplement has been proven to consistently or completely relieve the symptoms of depression. Supplements are not tested or standardized and may vary in strengths and effects. They may have side effects and are not always safe.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

- **Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area.
- **Learn to manage stress.** Ask for help when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, try to quit. Avoid

alcohol and drugs, because they can make your symptoms worse. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.

- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Certain medicines can add to the symptoms of depression.
- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

Get emergency care if you or a loved one have serious thoughts of suicide or harming others.

For more information, contact:

- National Institute of Mental Health  
866-615-6464  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>
- Mental Health America  
800-969-6642  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>

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