

Major Depression

What is major depression?

Major depression is severe depression that lasts more than 2 weeks and is not caused by a specific event. Depression is a condition in which you feel sad, hopeless, and uninterested in daily life. The depression may keep you from doing everyday activities. You may have major depression only once, or you may have it many times in your life.

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. Stress may also play a part.
- 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 heart disease or cancer increases your risk for depression.

Depression is more common in women than in men. It can start at any age.

What are the symptoms?

Besides feeling very 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
- Feeling hopeless or just not caring about anything
- Having physical symptoms such as headache or joint pain
- Thinking often about death or suicide

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?

Depression can be successfully treated with medicine, therapy, 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.

Interpersonal therapy can help you work on one or two problem areas, such as relationships with friends and family.

Other treatments

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables is 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 at home and work 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.** Certain medicines can add to the symptoms of depression. If you have had depression, tell all healthcare providers who treat

you about all medicines you are taking, including nonprescription products and natural remedies.

- **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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