



# Facts about Depression

*What you should know*

## *What is depression?*

Depression is an illness that millions of Americans deal with each year. It can make you feel sad, lonely and tired. Many people do not go to their doctor because they are afraid to talk about how they feel. Some people think that having depression is a sign of weakness, but that is not true. Depression is a medical illness just like high blood pressure or diabetes (too much sugar in the blood). Depression happens when chemicals in your brain get out of balance and you need treatment.

## *Why do you get depression?*

Depression can change the way we think, act and feel. Sometimes, the chemicals change after a medical illness or after taking certain medicines. It can also happen when we have problems that cause stress. These include problems with family or friends, illness or death of a loved one, retiring from a job, or money worries. People with diabetes, asthma, HIV/AIDS, or cancer, and those who have had a stroke or heart attack get depression more often than others.

## *What are the common signs of depression?*

People with depression do not all feel the same way. One person may have a mild case of depression and someone else may have a more severe case.

If you have depression, you might:

- Feel sad.
- Feel grouchy.
- Feel angry.
- Want to be alone.
- Sleep longer or shorter than normal.
- Feel that nothing is fun any longer.
- Cry a lot.
- Worry too much about small things.
- Feel hopeless or out of control.
- Be tired most of the time.
- Eat more or less than normal.
- Have body aches and pains.



If you have any of these signs that last more than 2 weeks, you should think about talking with your doctor.

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**Q.** *What does depression do to us?*

Depression can change our thoughts and the way we act.

- We may not want to be with people or do fun things.
- We may feel that we are not worthwhile.
- We may believe that others do not care about us.
- It can be hard to make even simple, daily choices.
- We may have trouble being able to control our anger and feel grouchy.

**Q.** *How do I know if I should see my doctor?*

Ask yourself these questions. If you say yes to any of these questions, you should talk with your doctor. It is better to get help with depression early. If you wait to get help, it may take longer to feel better. Have you had any of these feelings for more than 2 weeks?

- Have you felt sad or blue?
- Have you felt tired or do not want to do anything?
- Have you found it hard to think or recall things?
- Have you felt like you do not enjoy your hobbies anymore?
- Have you been sleeping too much or too little?
- Have you either lost or gained weight?
- Have you been feeling guilty about something?

**Q.** *What will the doctor do when I go to the office?*

Your doctor will ask you questions about how you are feeling and about any medical problems you have. Sometimes, your doctor may also do an exam and order blood tests. Your doctor will be able to tell if you have depression and suggest treatment to get better.

**Q.** *How will I get better?*

Your doctor may suggest that you take medicine (antidepressants) or may ask you to talk with a mental health specialist. Sometimes, your doctor will ask you to do both.

*Questions about taking antidepressant medicine.*

**Q.** *What are antidepressants and how do they work?*

Antidepressants are pills that people take to help balance the chemicals in their brain and get them back to normal. It often takes about 2–4 weeks to begin to feel better. It may take 8–12 weeks to get back to normal.

**Q.** *How long will I have to take the medicine?*

After you start to get better, it is best to keep taking the medicine for at least 6 months. For depression that has lasted a long time, 1 year or longer, you should think about taking the medicine longer. Your doctor will be able to tell you how long to stay on the medicine. If you don't take the medicine long enough, the depression may come back.

**Q.** *If I don't get better taking the medicine, does this mean I won't get better even if the medicine is changed?*

**No.** There are many kinds of medicine to treat depression, and each medicine differs in how it works. Some people will get better on one medicine while others get better on a different medicine. Changing medicines or the amount you take are ways to make depression better.

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Your doctor may change your medicine or suggest taking more than 1 medicine if the first one did not work by itself.

**Q.** *Will the medicine change who I am?*

Antidepressants do not change who you are but will help you feel more relaxed and better about yourself. It often takes a few weeks to adjust to the medicine and begin to feel better.

During this time, you may not feel the same while your brain is getting used to the medicine. After that, you should feel better.

**Q.** *Are there any problems staying on the medicine for a long time?*

All antidepressants can have side effects but do not normally cause long-term problems.

**Q.** *What are the side effects of the medicine?*

When you start to take the medicine, you may have some side effects. The most common side effects are dry mouth, feeling a little sick or nauseous, not able to sleep, headaches, and feeling tired or nervous. This does not mean that the medicine is not working well. It means that the chemicals in your brain are trying to get back in balance. There are many newer medicines today that do not have the same side effects as the older ones. Call your doctor if your side effects are severe or do not go away in a few days or weeks.

**Q.** *Can I just stop taking the medicine on my own?*

It is not good to stop taking the medicine without talking with your doctor. You can get worse if you just quit taking the medicine.

**Q.** *If I'm having a bad day, can I take another pill?*

**No.** The medicine does not work that way, and it can be risky to take more medicine than your doctor suggests. It may take time for your body to adjust to the medicine and for the chemicals in your brain to get back in balance.

You may not feel like you are getting better, but be patient. Keep taking your medicine, and talk with your doctor if you have questions.

**Q.** *Is the medicine habit-forming?*

Antidepressants are not habit-forming.

**Q.** *Can I drink alcohol if I am taking antidepressants?*

It is not good to drink alcohol when taking depression medicine. Alcohol can make depression worse when taking depression medicine.

*Questions about talking with a behavioral health (BH) specialist.*

**Q.** *What is a behavioral health specialist?*

A BH specialist is a person trained to help others with behavioral health problems, like depression. These specialists went to college and passed tests to get a license to work with people who have BH problems.

**Q.** *What are the different kinds of BH specialists?*

There are many different kinds of specialists who you can go to for help. A psychiatrist is often the person who prescribes medicine. Sometimes, a psychiatric nurse specialist can also prescribe medicine. Other specialists, listed below, are people you can talk to and who can work with you to beat depression.

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1. Psychiatrist: a medical doctor (MD or DO) specially trained in treating behavioral health problems. They normally prescribe depression medicine.
2. Psychologist: a person with a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) or Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology) degree. They can see you in their office and work with you to get over your depression. Most psychologists do not prescribe medicines because this is usually done by your psychiatrist.
3. Licensed clinical social worker (LCSW): a person who has a master's degree who can help with many problems like depression.
4. Licensed professional counselor (LPC) or licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT): a person who has a master's degree in counseling. The counselor can meet with you in the office to help you with depression.
5. Psychiatric nurse practitioner/specialist: a registered nurse with a master's degree who treats behavioral problems. Sometimes, they have extra training so they can prescribe medicines.

All of these people may also be called “therapists” because they help you get better.

One of the most important things about counseling is that you find a person you like and trust. If you do not feel at ease, it is better to find someone else to go to for treatment.

**Q.** *When should I see a BH specialist?*

Sometimes, your medical doctor will suggest that you see a BH specialist because the medicine alone is not working well. You may also choose to see a BH specialist before trying medicine.

Talking about problems with the BH specialist can be very helpful to get over depression.

**Q.** *What will the therapist talk to me about?*

The therapist will discuss ways to help you work through your sadness, fears or stress. One kind of therapy is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This kind of therapy works well for depression. It helps you learn new ways of thinking to beat depression. Your feelings may not change quickly because it takes time and practice to heal from depression. You will work on goals and practice new ways of thinking and acting that help you feel good again. Find a therapist that you feel at ease with to get better faster.

**Q.** *What else can I do to beat depression?*

It is important to take care of yourself by trying not to do things that will cause more stress. It is helpful to be with family and friends that you trust and make you feel good. Also:

1. While you are getting over depression, it is not good to make major decisions until you feel better.
2. Alcohol and drugs can make depression worse.
3. Ask your family and friends for patience and support while you work through your depression. Depression begins slowly over time and it takes time to go away.
4. A walk around the block can help distract you from feelings of depression.
5. Take it easy on yourself. Don't expect to do all the things you did before until you get better.
6. Listen to music you like. Music can have a big effect on your feelings as it reminds you of happy times.

Some people find it very hard to talk and be around others when they are depressed. If you feel this way, don't force yourself to be with others. If you find it hard to be around others, tell your therapist or doctor.

You don't have to go through depression alone – And you can feel better. Take that first step by talking with your doctor and starting treatment.