

DEPRESSION



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

What is depression?

Depression is the presence of persistent sadness and a loss of interest in activities that you normally enjoy, accompanied by an inability to carry out daily activities, for at least two weeks. It is different from the usual mood fluctuations or temporary sadness in response to challenges in everyday life.

It is a common illness; more than 300 million people are living with depression all around the world.

It can happen to anybody and begin at any time. It may happen only once or it may be recurrent.

Common signs and symptoms of depression

Depression has both mental and physical symptoms. It can be mild or severe to the point that one feels the life is not worth living any more, and at its worst it can lead to suicide.

Mental symptoms include unhappiness, loneliness, hopelessness, losing interest in the things you used to enjoy, feeling tearful, feeling guilty or worthless, low self-esteem, slower thinking, forgetfulness, difficulty in concentration, thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

Physical symptoms include constantly feeling a lack of energy, sleeping badly (sleeping too much or too little), having no appetite or eating too much, reduced sex drive, aches and pains, fatigue/weakness, or digestion problems with no specific physical disease.

Other symptoms in young people include behaviour problems that cause difficulties in functioning properly at home or school, increased tensions in relationships with family and friends or getting involved in risky behaviours. These can include missing school, harming themselves (e.g. cutting), abusing drugs or alcohol, and having inappropriate sexual relationships.

Other symptoms in older people include memory difficulties, confusion, personality changes (mimicking Alzheimer's disease), physical aches or pain, fatigue and sleep problems, and often wanting to stay at home rather than going out to socialize or doing new things.

Depression can co-occur with other medical illnesses, such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease and Parkinson's disease.

Depression in women and men

Depression is more common among women than men, and women are more likely to seek help for it than men. Women also go through phases in their life that make them more vulnerable to depression, such as pregnancy or the pre-menopausal period. Women make more suicide attempts, but have a lower rate of completing suicide than men.

Depression in men can show up through other symptoms such as taking refuge in solitary behaviours (spending a lot of time at work or on sports), alcohol or drug abuse, violent or abusive behaviour, irritability or inappropriate anger, and risky behaviour (e.g. reckless driving). Men are less likely than women to ask for help. Men may act more impulsively on suicidal thoughts and are more likely to use fatal methods (such as guns) and to complete suicide (to take their life) than women.

Common causes of depression

Many factors may increase the risk of becoming depressed, for example poverty, unemployment, life events such as the death of a loved one or a relationship break-up, physical illness and problems caused by alcohol and drug use. Genetic factors can also contribute to depression as depression runs in some families.

Very importantly, depression does not happen because:

- You have a weak personality and just need to pull yourself together!
- It is a punishment sent by God and you only need to strengthen your faith in God.
- You are lazy and just need to try waking up early and do more sports.
- You are pessimistic and just need to change your mindset to think positively.

When to seek help

If you have been experiencing symptoms of depression most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from depression. It is particularly important to seek help if you notice problems in your work or relationships, or other people tell you they are seeing a difference in you. It is good to talk to a friend or family member. Some people seek help from healers or religious leaders in their local community. Most people feel better temporarily after talking to those they trust, but for effective treatment you need to go to a local health worker or doctor or mental health professional.

It is an emergency if you have ideas about self-harm or suicide

If you feel it is not worth living anymore and think about harming yourself or taking your life, ask for help as soon as possible from a doctor or a mental health professional (psychiatrist, psychologist). If you are reluctant to ask for professional help, talk to a friend or family member or call a helpline.

Treating depression

Depression can be treated. Treatment for depression is available and effective, including medication (antidepressants) and talk therapy (psychotherapy) or a combination of both. The earlier you start the treatment, the better the outcome will be. A type of talk therapy often used is cognitive behavioural therapy, which focuses on helping patients establish new ways of thinking by directing attention to both the “wrong” and the “right” assumptions they make about themselves and others.

Treating depression does not usually require hospitalization. However, in some people, depression is so severe that a hospital stay is needed. This may be necessary if you cannot care for yourself properly or you are in immediate danger of harming yourself (thoughts of suicide or harming yourself) or harming someone else.

Key points about treatment

1. It may take 4–6 weeks to feel the full effect of antidepressants.
2. If treatment is going well, you will need to continue taking them at the same dose for at least 4–6 months after your symptoms have eased. Longer treatments may be necessary for recurrent depression.
3. Do not stop taking your medicine suddenly and without consulting your doctor. Antidepressants are not addictive, but you may get some withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking them suddenly or you miss a dose. Your depression may also flare up if you stop treatment suddenly.
4. If you or anyone around you notice increasing irritability and agitation in your behaviour, it is important to mention this to your doctor or health-care professional.

Home remedies and alternative medicines

Herbal medicine or alternative medicine such as vitamins or Omega 3 tablets cannot replace antidepressants when they are needed. However, most of these home remedies do not have known side effects and are not harmful so long as you continue taking your antidepressants. Other approaches like acupuncture, yoga, meditation, music or art therapy, spirituality/religious practices or aerobic exercise can also reduce your stress and make you feel better, but they are only complementary to your treatment plan and do not replace it.

How can you help yourself if you are depressed?

- **Stick to your treatment plan.** Do not skip or stop your medications or psychotherapy appointments. Depression may come back or you may experience withdrawal symptoms.
- **Pay attention to warning signs.** Learn what can trigger your depression and what are your early warning symptoms. Contact your doctor/therapist as soon as you recognize

these symptoms, and ask relatives or friends to also watch out for warning signs.

- **Talk about your depression.** Sharing a problem with someone else or with a group can give you support, and hearing about other people's experiences can provide insights into your own depression.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs.** Alcohol and drug use worsen the symptoms of depression and make them harder to treat. Talk with your doctor or therapist if you need help to stop them.
- **Take care of yourself.** Eat healthy, be physically active and get plenty of sleep. Stay connected with friends and family members and keep up with activities you used to enjoy.
- **Accept the current situation.** Accept that you have depression and adjust your expectations. You may not be able to accomplish as much as you usually do for a while.

How can you help a friend or family member who has depression?

- Talk about your concern for them. Make it clear that you want to help, listen without judgement and offer support.
- Encourage them to seek professional help and offer to accompany them to appointments.
- If medication is prescribed, help them to take it as prescribed.
- Encourage a healthy lifestyle including getting enough sleep, taking regular exercise and eating healthily.
- If you see any signs of possible self-harm or suicide, share your concern with your loved one, contact the doctor, call a suicide helpline or emergency service and seek help. This is a life-threatening emergency!

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: www.emro.who.int/mnh.