

# What is Depression?

Depression is more than just feeling sad or going through a rough patch. It's a serious mental health condition that requires understanding and medical care. Left untreated, depression can be devastating for the people who have it and for their families. Fortunately, with early detection, diagnosis and a treatment plan consisting of medication, psychotherapy and lifestyle choices, many people do get better.

Some people have only one episode in a lifetime, but for most people depression recurs. Without treatment, episodes may last a few months to several years. An estimated 16 million American adults—almost 7% of the population—had at least one major depressive episode in the past year.

People of all ages and all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds experience depression, but it does affect some groups of people more than others. Women are 70% more likely than men to experience depression, and young adults aged 18–25 are 60% more likely to have depression than people aged 50 or older.

## Symptoms

Just like with any mental illness, people with depression experience symptoms differently. But for most people, depression changes how they function day-to-day.

Common symptoms of depression include:

- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of concentration
- Loss of energy
- Lack of interest
- Low self esteem
- Hopelessness
- Changes in movement
- Physical aches and pains

## Causes

Depression does not have a single cause. It can be triggered, or it may occur spontaneously without being associated with a life crisis, physical illness or other risk. Scientists believe several factors contribute to cause depression:

- **Trauma.** When people experience trauma at an early age, it can cause long-term changes in how their brains respond to fear and stress. These brain changes may explain why people who have a history of childhood trauma are more likely to experience depression.
- **Genetics.** Mood disorders and risk of suicide tend to run in families, but genetic inheritance is only one factor.
- **Life circumstances.** Marital status, financial standing and where a person lives have an effect on whether a person develops depression, but it can be a case of “the chicken or the egg.”

- **Brain structure.** Imaging studies have shown that the frontal lobe of the brain becomes less active when a person is depressed. Depression is also associated with changes in how the pituitary gland and hypothalamus respond to hormone stimulation.
- **Other medical conditions.** People who have a history of sleep disturbances, medical illness, chronic pain, anxiety, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more likely to develop depression.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse.** Approximately 30% of people with substance abuse problems also have depression.

## Diagnosis

To be diagnosed with depression, a person must have experienced a major depressive episode that has lasted longer than two weeks. The symptoms of a major depressive episode include:

- Loss of interest or loss of pleasure in all activities
- Change in appetite or weight
- Sleep disturbances
- Feeling agitated or feeling slowed down
- Fatigue
- Feelings of low self-worth, guilt or shortcomings
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Suicidal thoughts or intentions

## Treatments

Although depression can be a devastating illness, it often responds to treatment. The key is to get a specific evaluation and a treatment plan. Treatment can include any one or combination of:

- **Medications** including antidepressants, mood stabilizers and antipsychotic medications
- **Psychotherapy** including cognitive behavioural therapy, family-focused therapy and interpersonal therapy
- **Brain stimulation therapies** including electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) or repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS)
- **Light therapy**, which uses a light box to expose a person to full spectrum light and regulate the hormone melatonin
- **Exercise**
- **Alternative therapies** including acupuncture, meditation, and nutrition
- **Self-management strategies and education**
- **Mind/body/spirit approaches** such as meditation, faith, and prayer

