

## A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health

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### Mental Health

#### Depression


When a person has a depressive disorder, it hurts their daily life, normal functioning, and causes pain for both the person with the disorder and those who care about him or her. Depression is a common but serious illness, and most who have it need treatment to get better.

Different kinds of depression include:

- **Major depressive disorder.** Also called major depression, this is a combination of symptoms that interfere with a person's ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy once-pleasurable activities.
- **Dysthymic disorder.** Also called dysthymia, this kind of depression lasts for a long time (two years or longer). The symptoms are less severe than major depression but can prevent one from living normally or feeling well.

Some forms of depressive disorder exhibit slightly different characteristics than those described above, or they may develop under unique circumstances. However, not all scientists agree on how to characterize and define these forms of depression. They include:

- **Psychotic depression,** which occurs when a severe depressive illness is accompanied by some form of psychosis, such as a break with reality, hallucinations, and delusions.
- **Postpartum depression,** which is diagnosed if a new mother develops a major depressive episode within one month after delivery.
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD),** which is a depression during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight.



Learn more about **postpartum depression**, depression that follows the birth of a baby.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating, or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not get better, even with treatment

## Treatment

Depression, even the most severe cases, can be treated. The sooner treatment begins, the more effective it is.

The first step to getting appropriate treatment is to visit a doctor. Certain medications, and some medical conditions (such as viruses or a thyroid disorder), can cause the same symptoms as depression. A doctor can rule out these possibilities with a physical exam, by asking questions, and lab tests. If the doctor can rule out a medical condition as a cause, he or she should conduct a psychological exam or refer the patient to a mental health professional.

The doctor or mental health professional will conduct a complete diagnostic exam. He or she should discuss any family history of depression, and get a complete history of symptoms. He or she should also ask if the patient is using alcohol or drugs, and whether the patient is thinking about death or suicide.

The most common treatments for depression are medication (antidepressants) and psychotherapy.







## More information on Depression

### Read more from womenshealth.gov

- Depression During and After Pregnancy Fact Sheet - This fact sheet discusses depression during and after pregnancy, what might cause it, symptoms you may experience, and how it is treated. It also explains how untreated depression can negatively affect your life.

- Depression Fact Sheet - This fact sheet offers information on depression, its symptoms and causes, how it is treated, and where to get help.

## Explore other publications and websites

- Age Page: Depression - This fact sheet explains the signs and symptoms of clinical depression and provides information on prevention and getting help.
- Antidepressants: What You Need to Know About Depression Medication (Copyright © HelpGuide.org)  - This publication describes how antidepressants work, including information about effectiveness and withdrawal. It lists the different types of antidepressants available and also describes the available treatment alternatives.
- Depression During and After Pregnancy: A Resource for Women, Their Families, and Friends - This booklet provides information on depression during and after pregnancy, addressing a broad range of physical and emotional struggles that pregnant and postpartum women and their families face. The booklet focuses on the possible causes of perinatal depression, how to identify it, what to do, and how it can affect your baby and your family. It also discusses the differences between "baby blues," perinatal depression, and postpartum psychosis.
- Depression in Women (Copyright © Mental Health America)  - This fact sheet provides statistical information comparing the experience of depression in women versus men. It informs women on the causes and symptoms of depression and where to seek help.
-  Late-Life Depression (Copyright © National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression)  - Depression can occur at any age, but symptoms in older persons often go overlooked and unchecked. This fact sheet describes the causes, symptoms, and treatments of late-life depression.
- Mental Health Services Locator - This website will help you locate mental health treatment facilities and support services in your state.
- Signs and Symptoms of Mood Disorders (Copyright © Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)  - If you think you might have depression or bipolar disorder, this fact sheet will help guide you through the first steps of the diagnosis process. If you experience the symptoms listed here, you may want to talk with your doctor about depression or bipolar disorder.
- St. John's Wort and Depression - This fact sheet has information about St. John's Wort, a popular herb being used by the public today to treat mild depression. This publication includes information on the FDA's role to monitor the use of this herb, how St. John's Wort works, how it is used to treat depression, and a drug interaction advisory.
-  Women and Depression: Discovering Hope - This brochure talks about what depression is, the different forms of depression, and the symptoms of depression in women. It also talks about how depression affects women of all ages and gives advice on where to go for help.

## Connect with other organizations

- [American Psychological Association](#)
- [Brain & Behavior Research Foundation](#)
- [Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance](#)
- [Freedom From Fear](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
- [National Institute of Mental Health, NIH, HHS](#)
- [National Institute on Aging, NIH, HHS](#)
- [National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse](#)
- [National Runaway Switchboard Hotline](#)
- [Postpartum Support International](#)
- [PPD Moms](#)

Content last updated March 29, 2010.

Resources last updated September 20, 2013.