



Older Adults and Depression

Do you feel very tired, helpless and hopeless? Are you sad most of the time and take no pleasure in your family, friends, or hobbies? Are you having trouble working, sleeping, eating, and functioning? Have you felt this way for a long time?

If so, you may have depression.

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What is depression?

Everyone feels down or sad sometimes, but these feelings usually pass after a few days. When you have depression, you have trouble with daily life for weeks at a time. Depression is a serious illness that needs treatment. If left untreated, depression can lead to suicide.

Depression is a common problem among older adults, but it is **not** a normal part of aging. It may be overlooked because for some older adults who have depression, sadness is not their main symptom. They may have other, less obvious symptoms of depression or they may not be willing to talk about their feelings. Therefore, doctors may be less likely to recognize that their patient has depression.



What are the different forms of depression?

There are several forms of depression. The most common forms are:

Major depression—severe symptoms that interfere with your ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy life. Some people may experience only a single episode within their lifetime, but more often a person may have multiple episodes.

Dysthymic disorder, or dysthymia—depressive symptoms that last a long time (2 years or longer) but are less severe than those of major depression.

Minor depression—similar to major depression and dysthymia, but symptoms are less severe and may not last as long.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

Different people have different symptoms. Some symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad or “empty”
- Feeling hopeless, irritable, anxious, or guilty
- Loss of interest in favorite activities
- Feeling very tired
- Not being able to concentrate or remember details
- Not being able to sleep, or sleeping too much
- Overeating, or not wanting to eat at all
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems.

What causes depression?

Several factors, or a combination of factors, may contribute to depression.

Genes—people with a family history of depression may be more likely to develop it than those whose families do not have the illness. Older adults who had depression when they

were younger are more at risk for developing depression in late life than those who did not have the illness earlier in life.

Brain chemistry—people with depression may have different brain chemistry than those without the illness.

Stress—loss of a loved one, a difficult relationship, or any stressful situation may trigger depression.

For older adults who experience depression for the first time later in life, the depression may be related to changes that occur in the brain and body as a person ages. For example, older adults may suffer from restricted blood flow, a condition called *ischemia*. Over time, blood vessels may stiffen and prevent blood from flowing normally to the body's organs, including the brain.

If this happens, an older adult with no family history of depression may develop what is sometimes called “vascular depression.” Those with vascular depression also may be at risk for heart disease, stroke, or other vascular illness.

Depression can also co-occur with other serious medical illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and Parkinson's disease. Depression can make these conditions worse, and vice versa. Sometimes, medications taken for these illnesses may cause side effects that contribute to depression. A doctor experienced in treating these complicated illnesses can help work out the best treatment strategy.

How is depression treated?

The first step to getting appropriate treatment is to visit a doctor. Certain medications or conditions can cause symptoms similar to depression. A doctor can rule out these factors by doing a complete physical exam, interview, and lab tests.

If these other factors can be ruled out, the doctor may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychologist, counselor, social worker, or psychiatrist. Some

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