

Depression

Symptoms of depression can affect an individual's body, mood, thoughts and behaviors. An individual suffering from depression often experiences changes in eating and sleeping habits, self-concept and the way s/he things about the world. Depression is not the same as sadness or a blue mood, nor is it a sign of a personal weakness. Without adequate treatment, depressive can last for months, and may cause other psychiatric or medical problems.

There are three main types of depression. *Major depression* involves by a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat, and enjoy pleasurable activities.

A less severe type of depression, *dysthymia*, is characterized by chronic symptoms that are not necessarily debilitating but keep the individual from functioning at their typical level. Many people with dysthymia experience major depressive episodes at some time in their lives.

Another type of depression is *bipolar depression*, or, the depressive phase bipolar illness. (Bipolar disorder is characterized by cycling mood changes: severe highs (mania) and lows (depression). Bipolar Disorder is discussed in more detail in another section of this website.)

Symptoms of depression may include:

- Persistent feelings of sadness or emptiness
- Pessimism and guilt
- Lowered self-esteem
- Loss of interest or pleasure in things that were previously experienced as pleasurable
- Feelings of lethargy and fatigue
- Impaired concentration and memory
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Anxiety and irritability
- Continued physical complaints that do not respond to standard medical treatment

Depression is a medical illness that can be triggered by negative life events or it can occur without warning. Generally, scientists believe that an interaction of genetic, psychological and environmental factors contribute to depression. Statistically, women experience depression about twice as often as men. Individuals may experience one episode or recurrent episodes of depression throughout their lifetime.

Depression can also occur with physical illness. Being ill can cause anyone to feel sad. However, if the feelings do not lift, depression may be present. It is thought that such depressions occur in about 40 percent of patients who are diagnosed with other medical conditions. Strokes, heart attacks, cancer,

Parkinson's disease and hormone disorders are among the medical problems known to contribute to depression. Depression and medical illnesses can occur together or can result as a cause or effect of the medical problem. In addition, incapacitated patients or those in chronic pain can react to their distress by becoming depressed. Depressive symptoms can occur as side effects of medications being used to treat medical illness. When patients learn how to better manage their chronic pain or deal with needed life adjustments, the likelihood of recovery from depression is also increased.

Treatment approaches that incorporate psychiatric medication along with psychotherapy seem to be most effective. Some people with milder forms of depressions may respond to psychotherapy alone. Medications which are sometimes used in the treatment of depression include (but are not limited to): SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), SNRIs, NEDA medications, tricyclics and MAOIs (monoamine oxidase inhibitors). Generally, your psychiatrist will choose a medication based on your symptom presentation, other medical problems, other medications which you take and your tolerance for specific side effects. Although patients may see some improvement in the first few weeks of treatment, most antidepressants must be taken regularly for a minimum of three to four weeks before the full therapeutic effect is taken. Caution is used in the treatment of depression as some literature reports the increased risk of suicidal behavior in the early phases of treatment, especially in adolescents. Different forms of psychotherapy for depression may involve insight-oriented therapy, which attempts to help patients identify paths to problem resolution, behavioral techniques which help patients learn how to obtain more satisfaction through their own actions, interpersonal therapy which focuses on problematic relationships that can cause or worsen depression and cognitive therapy in which therapists attempt to change negative thinking patterns which contribute to depression.

Effective treatment is available, but the patient will need support from family and friends. In addition, information about the illness often speeds the recovery process.