

Focus on: Depression

REFERENCE



What is Depression?

Depression is an illness that involves the body, mood and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself, and the way one thinks about things. Depression is not the same as “feeling blue” for a short period of time. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with depression cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help most people who suffer from depression.

Types of Depression

Depressive disorders come in different forms, just as is the case with other illnesses such as heart disease. Below are three of the most common types of depressive disorders. However, within these types there are variations in the number of symptoms, their severity, and persistence.

- > Major depression is manifested by a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat, and enjoy once pleasurable activities. Such a disabling episode of depression may occur only once but more commonly occurs several times in a lifetime.

- > Dysthymia is a less severe type of depression. It involves long-term, chronic symptoms that do not disable, but keep one from functioning well or from feeling good. Many people with dysthymia also experience major depressive episodes at some time in their lives.
- > Bipolar disorder, also called manic-depressive illness, is not nearly as prevalent as other forms of depressive disorders and is characterized by cycling mood changes: severe highs (mania) and lows (depression). Sometimes the mood switches are dramatic and rapid, but most often they are gradual.

Causes of Depression

Some types of depression run in families, suggesting that a biological vulnerability can be inherited. This seems to be the case with bipolar disorder. Studies of families in which members of each generation develop bipolar disorder found that those with the illness have a somewhat different genetic makeup than those who do not get ill. However, the reverse is not true: not everybody with the genetic makeup that causes vulnerability to bipolar disorder will have the illness.

Although major depression can occur generation after generation, it can also occur in people who have



Nationwide
Better Health[®]

On Your Side[®]

no family history of depression. Whether inherited or not, major depressive disorder is often associated with changes in brain structures or brain function.

People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism or who are readily overwhelmed by stress are prone to depression. Whether this represents a psychological predisposition or an early form of the illness is not clear.

In recent years, research has shown medical conditions and illnesses such as stroke, heart attack, or cancer can cause depressive illness, making the sick person apathetic and unwilling to care for his or her physical needs, thus prolonging the recovery period. Also, personal changes in someone's life can cause depression. Those changes can be:

- > A serious loss
- > Difficult relationship
- > Financial problem
- > Or any stressful (unwelcome or even desired) change in life patterns

All of these can trigger a depressive episode. Very often, a combination of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors is involved in the onset of a depressive disorder.

TIPS



Treatment

The first step to getting appropriate treatment for depression is a physical examination by your physician. Certain medications, as well as some medical conditions such as a viral infection, can cause the same symptoms as depression. Your physician should rule out these possibilities through examination, interview and lab tests. If a physical cause for the depression is ruled out, a psychological evaluation should be done by your physician or by referral to a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Treatment choice will depend on the outcome of the evaluation. There are a variety of antidepressant medications and psychotherapies that can be used to treat depressive disorders. Some people with milder forms may do well with "talk" therapy alone. People with moderate to severe depression most often benefit from antidepressants. Most do best with combined

treatment: medication to relieve symptoms relatively quickly and psychotherapy to learn more effective ways to deal with life's problems, including depression. Depending on the patient's diagnosis and severity of symptoms, the therapist may prescribe medication and/or one of the several forms of psychotherapy that have proven effective for depression.

"Whether inherited or not, major depressive disorder is often associated with changes in brain structures or brain function."

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) can be useful for individuals whose depression is severe or life threatening, or who either cannot take or are not relieved by antidepressant medication.

You and your physician will determine what treatment method is best for you. Do not begin any treatment without consulting your physician first.

For more information on depression, log onto www.nimh.nih.gov.

For more information about Nationwide Better Health visit nwbetterhealth.com. Or contact your benefits representative.



**Nationwide
Better Health®**

On Your Side®