

## What is depression?

We all feel sad, moody or unhappy from time to time, particularly when faced with loss or grief. This is normal.

Clinical depression is different. It is a serious illness that results in a long-term depressed mood.

Depression can leave you feeling sad, 'down in the dumps', unmotivated and anxious. You cannot seem to lift yourself out of this misery.

Depression is common. It affects up to one in four people at some time in their lives. Women are affected more than men. As there is a social stigma around depression, and some people deny that they are depressed.

## What causes depression?

The causes are uncertain but are likely to result from a combination of factors such as:

- biochemical changes in the brain
- a life-changing event – such as the birth of baby, loss of a loved one, divorce, new job, physical trauma or illness
- personality type
- family traits – such as a history of depression/anxiety
- chronic physical or mental illness
- medications, illegal drugs, alcohol abuse
- ongoing problems at home or work.

There may be no apparent reason for your depression.

## What are the symptoms?

Depression can affect people of all ages in different ways, such as:

- feeling sad, hopeless, or depressed
- feeling tired all the time
- loss of sex drive (*libido*)
- sleep problems (such as being unable to get to sleep or waking up early)
- changes in appetite or weight
- loss of interest, motivation and pleasure in daily life, work, hobbies and family
- not coping with life
- having trouble concentrating and making decisions
- feeling worthless, guilty or unwanted
- feeling restless, irritable or angry
- lapses in personal hygiene, such as not bathing or shaving as often

- tension and anxiety
- constipation or indigestion
- withdrawal or disconnection from friends and family.

The symptoms can vary during the day but are often worse in the morning. Some people have other complaints such as headaches and stomach pains. Sometimes other conditions such as anaemia and an under-active thyroid may be suspected. Some people who are severely depressed may have thoughts of wanting to kill themselves (*suicide*). This is an emergency situation – if you or someone you know feel this way you need to see a doctor or go to the nearest hospital emergency department straight away.

## Treatment

Treatments aim to help you return to feeling 'normal' and being able to enjoy life again. Studies show that the best approach is a combination of medication and therapy (such as counselling).

- **Antidepressant medications** slowly return the balance of the chemicals in the brain back to normal levels. These medications are not addictive and most people have a good response to treatment. Medications may need to be taken for six to 12 months (or longer) to prevent a relapse. Antidepressants do not work straight away and some may take up to two months to have any effect. It is important that you keep taking them even if you do not feel any better. Speak to your local doctor or pharmacist for any information. The newer medications have few side effects and these often settle after two or three weeks. See your local doctor if you have any concerns.
- Herbal remedies, such as **St John's Wort**, may help. Do not take these if you are on antidepressants before consulting your doctor or pharmacist. St John's Wort may interfere with the effects of some medications, including some antidepressants and the oral contraceptive pill.
- **Grief counselling** may help people to deal with feelings of grief and loss.
- **Psychotherapy** helps people understand their thoughts, behaviours and relationships. The treatment helps people find other ways of thinking about and coping with problems.
- Sometimes severe depression is treated with **electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)**. It is a safe treatment that is used in cases of severe depression.
- **Admission to hospital** may be needed for severe cases or to provide a safe environment.

## Home care

Making positive life changes can help. Be guided by your local doctor but there are some simple steps that can help.

- Talk about your feelings and concerns with a close friend, loved one or doctor.
- Find a balance for work, rest and play.
- Eat a healthy diet, and limit alcohol and coffee.
- Keep active. Exercise can help lift your mood and feelings by releasing happy, feel-good hormones called *endorphins* from the brain.
- Take time out to relax. Learn deep breathing techniques, muscle relaxation or yoga.
- Plan regular social outings. Meet new people by joining a club or volunteer group.
- Form healthy sleeping patterns. Stick to a daily routine. Avoid sleeping during the day.
- Keep positive. Look for the good in every situation and avoid negative thoughts.
- Look for solutions. Break big jobs into little easy tasks. Seek help when you need it.
- Postpone major life decisions until you feel better.
- Avoid situations that may add to your depression.
- Learn to manage stress – take time out.
- Contact a professional help service listed under 'Want to know more?' on this factsheet.

## What to expect

Once treatment has started, the outlook for depression is very good with around a 70 per cent cure rate.

Keep in mind that treatment takes time. There will be good days and not so good ones. Never give up. Better times are ahead.

If ignored, depression can lead to intense suffering, marital breakdown, destroy friendships and badly affect work. Depression can be fatal if left untreated. If you feel so depressed that you want to harm yourself, you should talk to someone straight away. Always seek help.

**If you have thoughts of ending your life or want to act on them seek medical help immediately.**

Seeing your local doctor is the best place to start. They will be able to answer your concerns or questions and can refer you to a *psychotherapist*, *psychologist* or *psychiatrist* for more help.

## Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

**NURSE-ON-CALL** provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

\*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



## Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Phone **Lifeline** on 13 11 14 in a crisis.
- Phone **Kids Help Line** on 1800 55 1800
- Contact the **beyondblue** info line on 1300 22 46 36 or visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Contact the **Mental Health Foundation of Australia** (Victoria) on 03 9427 0406 [www.mentalhealthvic.org.au](http://www.mentalhealthvic.org.au)
- Contact the **SANE Australia** help line on 1800 18 72 63 [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)
- Visit **DepressioNet** [www.depressionet.com.au](http://www.depressionet.com.au)
- Contact the **Post and Ante Natal Depression Association** (PANDA) support line on 1300 72 63 06 or visit [www.panda.org.au](http://www.panda.org.au)
- Contact the **Association of Relatives and Friends of the Emotionally and Mentally Ill** (ARAFEMI) on 03 9810 9300 or visit [www.arafemi.org.au](http://www.arafemi.org.au)
- Visit the **Better Health Channel** [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

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