

What is depression?

Depression is a medical illness like diabetes or high blood pressure. People don't choose to be depressed. It's not because they're weak or "crazy." Depression is an illness. It affects about 17% of people at some time in their lives. It's more common in women than in men. Symptoms of depression include the following:

- Feeling sad most of the day, nearly every day, for 2 weeks or longer
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Lack of energy
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Weight changes
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness
- Not being able to make decisions
- Thoughts of death and suicide

What causes depression?

The exact cause of depression is not known. Doctors think it may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. The imbalance could be caused by your genes or by events in your life. Sometimes there aren't enough chemical messengers (called neurotransmitters) in the brain. These neurotransmitters carry messages (nerve impulses) from one nerve cell to another. When there aren't enough, certain messages don't get carried to some areas of the brain. Two primary messengers, called serotonin ("seer-o-tone-in") and norepinephrine ("nor-ep-in-nef-rin"), are responsible for your moods (how you feel).

How will my doctor treat my depression?

Depression can be treated with both medicines and counseling, or a combination. The combination of medicine with counseling helps most people. Counseling can help you change a negative view of yourself, of your past and of your future. Regular exercise and avoiding too much caffeine, alcohol and all illegal drugs can also help.

More than 20 medicines treat depression. These medicines are called antidepressants. They help increase the number of chemical messengers that affect your mood.

How will my doctor pick an antidepressant for me?

Your doctor will consider many things before choosing an antidepressant medicine for you. If you or one of your relatives had depression before and a certain antidepressant worked well, this might be the best medicine. The choice of an antidepressant also depends on how often you have to take it, how much it costs and which symptoms you have like sleeplessness, anxiety or lack of energy. No antidepressant is totally free from side effects. The best medicine for you may be the one that gives you the fewest side effects. Your doctor will want to choose a medicine he or she knows a lot about. If you're taking other medicines, it's important to consider how an antidepressant will work with the other medicines.

Are antidepressants tranquilizers or "uppers"? Can I get addicted to them?

No is the answer to all these questions. These drugs aren't tranquilizers. They don't give you a "high." They aren't addictive.

How long will I take the antidepressant?

If this is the first time you have been treated for depression, you will probably take this medicine for about 6 months after you begin to feel better again. If this is the second time you've had depression, you might keep taking the medicine for at least a year. Depression that comes back a third time may require you to take an antidepressant for a long time, maybe for your lifetime.

What are some of the common side effects of antidepressants?

You might have different side effects with different medicines. Most are bothersome and not serious. Many side effects go away within one or two weeks of taking the medicine. There are 2 main kinds of antidepressants: the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (called **SSRIs**) and the **tricyclic** antidepressants.

SSRIs might have the following side effects:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Tremor
- Dry mouth
- Sleepiness
- Diarrhea
- Insomnia
- Anxiety
- Sexual dysfunction (inability to ejaculate or to have an orgasm)

Some of the possible side effects of **tricyclic** antidepressants include:

- Dry mouth
- Blurred vision
- Increased sleepiness
- Excessive tiredness
- Hand tremors
- Feeling of weakness
- Constipation
- Bladder problems
- Weight gain
- Muscle twitching
- Increased heart rate
- Dizziness when standing up

You have to be careful if you get sleepy or dizzy when you take tricyclic antidepressants. It's not good to drive or operate machines when you take them, because they affect your reflexes and your attention span.

What if the side effects don't go away after a little while?

Talk to your doctor. He or she may change your dosage or you might try another medicine to get rid of the side effects.

How will I know if my antidepressant is working?

If you can sleep better, you know the medicine is working. If you can take care of yourself better (such as hair care, dressing well, eating regularly), you know the medicine is working. When the medicine is working well, you are better able to meet your day-to-day obligations. You have more energy. Your weight problems will get better, and your appetite will be closer to "normal." You will have an increased desire to live. Both you and your family and friends will notice these changes.

Can I drink alcohol when I'm taking antidepressants?

No. You should not drink alcohol because it might have a bad effect, such as sleepiness or dizziness. You can be strongly affected by even a little bit of alcohol.

Where can I get more information about depression?

Your doctor is the first person you should talk to. This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. The following agencies can also give you more information:

The National Depressive and Manic-
Depressive Association
730 N. Franklin St., Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60610
Telephone: 800-826-3632
<http://www.ndmda.org>

The National Institute of Mental Health
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 10-85
Rockville, MD 20857
Telephone: 800-421-4211
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>