



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# Depression

**Depression is much more than feeling sad or in a low mood after a disappointing or distressing experience. Depression is a serious mental and physical illness that changes how a person thinks, feels and behaves. People with depression need professional help and sometimes medicines to get better.**

## Signs and symptoms

Depression can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, mood, behaviour and physical wellbeing. Symptoms include:

- Loss of motivation, interest and enjoyment in life
- Thoughts and feelings of sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, despair
- Thoughts and feelings of worthlessness, guilt, low self esteem
- Feeling restless, irritable, agitated, anxious
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Appetite and weight changes
- Tiredness, loss of energy
- Trouble thinking, concentrating and making decisions
- Thoughts of suicide or death
- Problems with sexual function or loss of interest in sex
- Headaches and muscle pains
- Constipation or diarrhoea.

If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor. Parents are encouraged to be alert to these symptoms in teenagers.

## Cause

Anyone can develop depression at any age, but it is more common in people with a family history of depression. It is thought to be at least partly due to a chemical imbalance in the brain and is often triggered by a combination of factors.

Factors that may contribute to an episode of depression include:

- Emotional stress (e.g., loss of a loved one, a relationship breakdown)
- Hormonal changes (e.g., postnatal depression after childbirth)

## Important

- It is normal to feel sad and in a low mood after a disappointing or distressing event. However, if low feelings become overwhelming or last for more than two weeks and are associated with other symptoms of depression, consult a doctor.
- Feelings of hopelessness and despair can lead to thoughts of suicide and self harm. These thoughts are serious and dangerous.

If you experience these thoughts, seek help.

- Isolation or loneliness
- Unemployment
- Alcohol, nicotine and drug abuse
- Medicines (e.g., some hormone, pain relieving, blood pressure, heart, cancer and psychiatric medicines)
- Medical conditions (e.g., cancer, diabetes, HIV, stroke, thyroid problems)
- Pain
- Poor physical health or physical disability
- Personality type
- Other mental illnesses (e.g., anxiety, dementia, schizophrenia).

## Treatment

Treatment often involves several different strategies and depends on the type and severity of the depression.

## Talking and support

Talking is often the first step in managing depression and psychological therapies (e.g., counselling and cognitive behaviour therapy) are important treatments. Local doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and some counsellors can help with these therapies.

## Medicines

Antidepressant medicines can correct the balance of chemicals in the brain. There are many types of antidepressants and a person may need to try several antidepressants before finding one that suits them.

Antidepressant medicines:

- Must be prescribed by a doctor
- Are not addictive
- Are most effective when combined with psychological therapy
- May take 6-8 weeks to work, although some people see benefits sooner
- May affect alertness and may cause drowsiness
- Need to be taken regularly and must not be stopped suddenly. Antidepressants should always be stopped gradually, with a doctor's supervision
- Can interact with other medicines, including non-prescription and complementary medicines – ask a doctor or pharmacist
- Alcohol and certain foods must be avoided while taking some antidepressant medicines – ask a pharmacist.

**Note:** Consult a doctor before using complementary therapies to manage depression.

## Self care

- Learn about depression and its treatment.
- Ask for help. Depression is an illness, not a weakness.
- Some people find it helpful to keep a diary or write down their thoughts and feelings.
- Let family and friends know how you are feeling. Even though they may not fully understand what you're going through, they may be able to give you extra support.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to relax your body and mind.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week – exercise can help improve your mood and physical health.
- Limit or stop cigarettes – nicotine may make anxiety worse. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

- Follow 'low-risk' drinking guidelines for alcohol or stop drinking alcohol. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- Limit or stop caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks) – it may make anxiety worse.
- Look after yourself. Do some things that you enjoy.

## Getting help

There are many organisations that provide help and support for people with depression and for their families and friends. Ask a doctor or pharmacist or contact one of the organisations listed below.

## Related fact cards

- *Anxiety*
- *Medicines and Driving (website only – ask your pharmacist)*
- *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Sleeping Problems*

## For more information

**A doctor** – listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

**Beyond blue** – phone 1300 22 4636 or website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**Community health and mental health centres** – listed in the front of your local white pages.

**HEALTH/insite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Kids Help Line** – phone 1800 55 1800 (24 hours, Australia-wide) or website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

**Lifeline** – phone 13 11 14 (24 hours, Australia-wide) or website [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Salvation Army Support Services** – under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book.

**The MoodGYM** – website [www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

**Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS)** – phone 1800 011 046 (freecall from anywhere in Australia) or website [www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs/vvcs.htm](http://www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs/vvcs.htm)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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