

Information for Patients

Depression in the Elderly**WHAT IS A MAJOR DEPRESSION?**

Major depression is a disease. It happens when changes in your brain make it hard to control your mood and other functions. It is *not* the same as the normal, passing feelings of sadness or depression that we all have when sad things happen in our lives. Major depression has specific symptoms that do not go away, that interfere with daily living and that cause mental pain and suffering.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

- A low, sad or depressed mood for most of the day, everyday, for at least two weeks
- Mood changes can also feel like extreme nervousness and can be accompanied by irritability
- Loss of interest in things that are normally pleasant and enjoyable
- Disturbance of sleep pattern: waking early, restlessness, broken sleep, difficulty falling asleep or falling asleep all the time
- Change in appetite (usually loss of appetite, but sometimes increased eating)
- Low energy, extreme fatigue
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating and making decisions
- Changes in memory (less efficient)
- Feelings of worthlessness, thinking of past mistakes
- Dwelling on the idea of death, feeling that life is not worth living, thoughts of suicide
- Generally feeling unwell (either slowed down in every way or constantly restless and anxious)

IS THERE TREATMENT?

Major depression is caused by chemical imbalances in your brain. These can be restored to normal, usually with the help of medication.

First, your doctor must make sure you don't have any other medical problems. Then, he or she will prescribe "antidepressant medication", which will

help to fix your chemical imbalance. This medication takes several weeks to work, so it is important you keep taking it. Your doctor may start you at a low dose to allow your body to adjust to the medication, and increase your dosage later. This medication is not addictive.

Most people have to keep taking their medication for a few months *after* they feel better. If you have had more than one case of depression, it is possible you might have to stay on medication indefinitely to make sure your depression does not come back.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

Although maintaining as much of a daily routine as possible is helpful, it can be difficult. Moderate physical exercise (e.g., walking) will help your body to restore its energy levels. Good nutrition is also important, even though you may not feel like eating.

Keep in contact with your friends and family. Part of severe depression often includes feeling "like a burden", but it will make your loved ones feel like they are helping you by spending time with them.

It is important that you tell someone about your depression – preferably your doctor – especially if you are having suicide thoughts. Talking about your feelings often helps to put them into perspective.

Remember to take your medication regularly, and let your doctor know about any side effects. Your doctor may suggest other treatments for you, and you should accept that help and advice. Remember that depression can be treated, so the sooner you seek treatment, the sooner you will feel better.

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