

Depression

Depression is a common mental disorder that causes people to experience depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, low energy, and poor concentration.

Depression is different from feeling down or sad. Unhappiness is something, which everyone feels at one time or another, usually due to a particular cause. A person suffering from depression will experience intense emotions of anxiety, hopelessness, negativity and helplessness, and the feelings stay with them instead of going away.

Depression can happen to anyone. Many successful and famous people who seem to have everything going for them battle with this problem. Depression also affects people of every age. Half of the people who have depression will only experience it once but for the other half it will happen again. The length of time that it takes to recover can range from around six months to a year or more.

Living with depression is difficult for those who suffer from it and for their family, friends, and colleagues. It can be difficult to know if you are depressed and what you can do about it.

Signs and symptoms of depression

- Tiredness and loss of energy.
- Sadness that doesn't go away.
- Loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Not being able to enjoy things that are usually pleasurable or interesting.
- Feeling anxious all the time.
- Avoiding other people, sometimes even your close friends.
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- Sleeping problems - difficulties in getting off to sleep or waking up much earlier than usual.
- Very strong feelings of guilt or worthlessness.
- Finding it hard to function at work/college/school.
- Loss of appetite.
- Loss of sex drive and/or sexual problems.
- Physical aches and pains.
- Thinking about suicide and death.
- Self-harm

If you experience four or more of these symptoms for most of the day - every day - for more than two weeks, you should seek help from your GP.

What causes depression? Depression can happen suddenly as a result of physical illness, experiences dating back to childhood, unemployment, bereavement, family problems or other life-changing events. Examples of chronic illnesses linked to depression include heart disease, back pain and cancer. Pituitary damage, a treatable condition, which frequently follows head injuries, may also lead to depression. Sometimes, there may be no clear reason for your depression, but whatever the original cause, identifying what may affect how you feel and the things that are likely to trigger depression is an important first step.

Types of depression: There are several types of depression, some of which are listed below and overleaf.

Mild depression: is when it has a limited negative effect on your daily life. For example, you may have difficulty concentrating at work or motivating yourself to do the things you normally enjoy.

Major depression: interferes with an individual's daily life - with eating, sleeping and other everyday activities. Some people may experience only one episode but it is more common to experience several episodes in a lifetime. It can lead to hospital admission; if the person is so unwell they are at risk of harm to themselves.

Bi-polar disorder: The mood swings in bi-polar disorder can be extreme - from highs, where the individual feels extremely elated and indestructible, to lows, where they may experience complete despair, lethargy and suicidal feelings. Sometimes people have very severe symptoms where they cannot make sense of their world and do things that seem odd or illogical.

Post-natal depression: Many new mothers experience what are sometimes called 'baby blues' a few days after the birth. These feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence are very distressing but in most cases last only a couple of weeks. Post-natal depression is more intense and lasts longer. It can leave new mothers feeling completely overwhelmed, inadequate and unable to cope. They may have problems sleeping, panic attacks or an intense fear of dying. They may also experience negative feelings towards their child. It affects one in ten mothers and usually begins two to three weeks after the birth.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): is associated with the start of winter and can last until spring when longer days bring more daylight. When it is mild, it is sometimes called 'winter blues'. SAD can make the sufferer feel anxious, stressed and depressed. It may interfere with their moods and with their sleeping and eating patterns.

Taking control of your depression: Depression often makes you feel helpless. Taking action to make yourself feel more in control will have a positive effect, whether it's going to see your GP for treatment, joining a gym, going for daily walks, or doing something that you are interested in or good at. If you don't feel up to starting something new or joining a local group on your own, ask a friend to come with you.

There are many things you can do to help manage your symptoms and a wide range of treatments, both medical and non-medical, available through your GP. Please read on for the diet and lifestyle changes that could help.

Diet and Lifestyle Advice for Optimal Mental Health

- Eat a diet high in nutrients – maximum nutrition is needed to support the brain's functioning
- Fill your plate with essential antioxidants – to help prevent oxidative damage in the brain
- Eat "smart" complex carbohydrates – for their calming effect in producing serotonin
- Eat protein-rich foods to boost happiness – providing the amino acid tryptophan that converts to serotonin
- Include omega-3 fatty acids in your diet – a deficit of omega-3 fatty acids is associated with depression
- Eat a Mediterranean-type diet – by eating plenty of fruits, nuts, vegetables, cereals, legumes and fish.
- Get enough vitamin D – the likelihood of having depression is higher in people with deficiency in this vitamin
- Select selenium-rich foods – studies report an association between low selenium intake and poorer moods
- Ditch artificial foods and replace with wholesome fresh foods
- Eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer fatty foods and sweets
- Eating at regular intervals is essential to maintain energy and blood sugar levels
- Reduce/remove stimulants i.e. alcohol, smoking, caffeine, artificial food additives
- Take regular exercise – at least 3 x 30 mins per week
- Try to get a good nights sleep, by adopting a regular schedule
- Reduce stress (coping strategies/meditation/quiet hobbies) and make time for relaxation
- Trying to develop a regular routine can help to give structure and focus to your day
- Join a support group – its important to reach out to people who understand what you are going through
- Stay at a healthy weight – people who are obese may be more likely to become depressed

When to seek Professional Help: If you've tried self-help options but you still can't control depression, consider therapy with a health professional. Therapy can help you understand why you may be experiencing depression and to learn coping skills.

Please Note: This handout should only be used as a guide to help inform you as to the foods that **may** support depression. It **should not** be used as definitive guide to depression.