

# **Clinical Depression – Symptoms, Diagnosis and Treatment Options**

The symptoms of depression can be complex and vary widely between people. But as a general rule, if you are depressed, you feel sad, hopeless and lose interest in things you used to enjoy.

The symptoms persist for weeks or months and are bad enough to interfere with your work, social life and family life.

There are many other symptoms of depression and you're unlikely to have every one listed below.

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

## **Psychological symptoms include:**

- continuous low mood or sadness
- feeling hopeless and helpless
- having low self-esteem
- feeling tearful
- feeling guilt-ridden
- feeling irritable and intolerant of others
- having no motivation or interest in things
- finding it difficult to make decisions
- not getting any enjoyment out of life
- feeling anxious or worried
- having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming yourself

## **Physical symptoms include:**

- moving or speaking more slowly than usual
- change in appetite or weight (usually decreased, but sometimes increased)
- constipation
- unexplained aches and pains

- lack of energy or lack of interest in sex (loss of libido)
- changes to your menstrual cycle
- disturbed sleep (for example, finding it hard to fall asleep at night or waking up very early in the morning)

### **Social symptoms include:**

- not doing well at work
- taking part in fewer social activities and avoiding contact with friends
- neglecting your hobbies and interests
- having difficulties in your home and family life

Depression can come on gradually, so it can be difficult to notice something is wrong. Many people continue to try to cope with their symptoms without realising they are ill. It can take a friend or family member to suggest something is wrong.

Doctors describe depression by how serious it is:

- **mild depression** has some impact on your daily life
- **moderate depression** has a significant impact on your daily life
- **severe depression** makes it almost impossible to get through daily life – a few people with severe depression may have psychotic symptoms

### **Grief and depression**

It can be hard to distinguish between grief and depression. They share many of the same characteristics, but there are important differences between them. Grief is an entirely natural response to a loss, while depression is an illness. People who are grieving find their feelings of loss and sadness come and go, but they're still able to enjoy things and look forward to the future. In contrast, people who are depressed have a constant feeling of sadness. They don't enjoy anything and find it hard to be positive about the future.

### **Other types of depression**

There are different types of depression and some conditions where depression may be one of the symptoms. These include:

- **Postnatal depression.** Some women develop depression after having a baby. Postnatal depression is treated in similar ways to other forms of depression, with talking therapies and antidepressant medicines.
- **Bipolar disorder** is also known as "manic depression". It's where there are spells of depression and excessively high mood (mania). The depression symptoms are similar to clinical depression, but the bouts of mania can include harmful behaviour such as gambling, going on spending sprees and having unsafe sex.
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD).** Also known as "winter depression", SAD is a type of depression that has a seasonal pattern usually related to winter.

## Diagnosis

**If you experience symptoms of depression for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks, you should seek help from your GP.**

It is especially important to speak to your GP if you experience:

- symptoms of depression that are not improving
- your mood affects your work, other interests, and relationships with your family and friends
- thoughts of suicide or self-harm

Sometimes, when people are depressed they find it hard to imagine that treatment can actually help. But the sooner you seek treatment, the sooner your depression will lift.

There are no physical tests for depression, though your GP may examine you and do some urine or blood tests to rule out other conditions that have similar symptoms, such as an underactive thyroid.

The main way in which your GP will tell if you have depression is by asking you lots of questions about your general health and how the way you are feeling is affecting you mentally and physically.

Try to be as open as you can be with the doctor. Describing your symptoms and how they are affecting you will really help your GP understand if you have depression and how severe it is.

Any discussion you have with your GP will be confidential. Your GP will only ever break this rule if there's a significant risk of harm to either yourself or others, and if informing a family member or carer would reduce that risk.

## **Treatment Options and Modalities**

**Treatment for depression usually involves a combination of medicines, talking therapies and self help.**

### **Treatment options**

The kind of treatment that your doctor recommends will be based on the type of depression you have. Below is a short description of the types of treatment your doctor may recommend.

#### **Mild depression**

- **Wait and see** - If you're diagnosed with mild depression, your depression may improve by itself. In this case, you'll simply be seen again by your GP after two weeks to monitor your progress. This is known as watchful waiting.
- **Exercise** - Exercise has been proven to help depression, and is one of the main treatments if you have mild depression. Your GP may refer you to a qualified fitness trainer for an exercise scheme or you can find out more about starting exercise [here](#). Read more about exercise for depression.
- **Self help groups** - Talking through your feelings can be helpful. It can be either to a friend or relative, or you can ask your GP to suggest a local self-help group. Find out more about depression support groups. Your GP may also recommend self-help books and online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

#### **Mild to moderate depression**

- **Talking therapy** - If you have mild depression that isn't improving, or you have moderate depression, your GP may recommend a talking treatment (a type of psychotherapy). There are different types of talking therapy for depression including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and counselling. Your GP can refer you for talking treatment or, in some parts of the country, you might be able to refer yourself.

## Moderate to severe depression

- **Antidepressants** - Antidepressants are tablets that treat the symptoms of depression. There are almost 30 different kinds of antidepressant. They have to be prescribed by a doctor, usually for depression that is moderate or severe.
- **Combination therapy** - Your GP may recommend that you take a course of antidepressants plus talking therapy, particularly if your depression is quite severe. A combination of an antidepressant and CBT usually works better than having just one of these treatments.
- **Mental health teams** - If you have severe depression, you may be referred to a mental health team made up of psychologists, psychiatrists, specialist nurses and occupational therapists. These teams often provide intensive specialist talking treatments as well as prescribed medication.