



What Women Need to Know about Depression

Life is full of ups and downs. But if the “down” times last a long time, or get in the way of living your life, you may be suffering from depression. Depression affects mood, mind, body, and behavior. Studies have shown that about 19 million people suffer from depression in the United States. It is a common but serious illness. Treatment can improve the symptoms more than 80 percent of the time.

Yet depression continues to cause unnecessary suffering because it often goes unrecognized. Although it affects both women and men, women experience depression twice as often as men. Studies continue to explore how special issues unique to women may be related to their higher rate of depression. Many women exposed to similar life problems do not develop depression. However, no matter what the cause, depression can be treated successfully.

What is depression?

Depression affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself, and the way you think about things. It is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a problem that can be willed or wished away. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. The right medicine, however, sometimes combined with counseling, can help most people who have depression.

The signs of depression vary from person to person. The kind of depression a person has usually determines how severe the symptoms are.

What are the types of depression?

Serious depressions—Call your doctor right away!

1. **Major depression** is the most common and serious type of depression. It has a distinct beginning. It can occur once, twice, or regularly. This health problem affects a person’s abilities and habits in almost all areas of life. Suicidal thinking or suicide attempts can be a real concern. If you have major depression, you may have some of these signs nearly every day, all day, for 2 weeks or longer:
 - Feeling sad or crying a lot
 - Losing interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy (including sex)
 - Feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless
 - Thinking about death or suicide
 - Sleeping too much, or not being able to go to sleep or stay asleep
 - Losing your appetite and losing weight (or eating too much and gaining weight)
 - Feeling very tired or slow
 - Having trouble paying attention and making decisions
 - Experiencing aches and pains that don't get better

- 2. Bipolar illness** involves cycles of feeling up (manic) and then down (depressed). During up episodes, people may become overly active, talkative, joyful (to the point of euphoria), or bad-tempered.
- 3. Postpartum depression** is common in about 10 percent of mothers in the first year after giving birth. Changes in hormones cause “baby blues” - mood swings that last a few hours to a few days and may occur on and off for several weeks. These symptoms are normal, but symptoms that continue for more than several weeks may be postpartum depression (PPD). PPD can be very serious and may risk the health of both the mother and the baby. Especially worrisome are a new mother’s persistent thoughts of hurting herself, the baby, or others.

Other mood disorders

- **Dysthymia** is a chronic mild depression. People with this problem often lack a zest for life, living joyless and fatigued days. Some people will still report that “things are going great” in their life. They do not understand why they are down, and may try to hide it from others.
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** is a kind of depression that occurs during times of the year when there is less sunshine.
- **PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder)** is a problem that causes women to have mood changes in the weeks before their menstrual period.
- **Situational depression** can include feelings of sadness due to a problem at work, a loss (such as a death or divorce), or money stress. The severity of symptoms depends on the kind of stress or loss the person has experienced.

What are the causes of depression?

We do not know the exact causes of depression in women. Studies have looked at the following:

- A family history of depression
- Hormonal changes
- Significant losses
- A difficult relationship and/or family violence
- Childhood abuse or witnessing a violent act
- Negative thinking, low self-esteem, worry, or negative body image

What is the treatment for depression?

Treatment for depression can include education, counseling, and medications. If you are depressed, self-care is also very important. Take good care of yourself, exercise regularly, and eat healthy foods. Often, these activities can help to improve your mood. If you are having serious problems, consider counseling, medications, or both.

Be sure to talk with your doctor to find the treatment that is best for you. Antidepressant medicines are very helpful in treating depression. You and your doctor can decide which type is right for you. Medicines alone or medicines with counseling can help most women who have depression.

Some Do's and Don'ts when you're depressed

Be **sure** to:

- Call Kaiser Permanente or talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner if you think you might be depressed.
- Exercise every day to make yourself feel better and to get more energy.
- Eat balanced meals and healthy food, and get enough rest.
- Make an effort to stay in touch with your loved ones and friends, your religious or spiritual advisor, and your family doctor.
- Take your medicine as directed and/or go to counseling as often as your doctor advises.
- Set small, step-by-step goals. Ask friends for support and encouragement. You may have less energy to get things done, so be patient with yourself.
- Get as much information as you can about depression and its treatment.
- If you start thinking about suicide, call your doctor or the local suicide crisis center right away.

Try **not** to:

- Make major life decisions (for example, about your job, or a move). You may not be thinking clearly right now, so your decisions may not be the best ones for you in the long run.
- Blame yourself for your depression or feel ashamed. Depression can be a way that your body is letting you know that it is time to focus on caring for yourself.
- Be discouraged about not feeling well right away. Be kind to yourself.
- Give up. Give yourself time to heal.

Should I tell people about my depression?

Deciding whether to tell your friends and family about your depression is up to you. You may feel embarrassed or ashamed, but you should know that depression is extremely common, and it is not your fault. Many people have incorrect information about depression, and it can prevent those who are depressed from getting the help they need. Don't let it happen to you.

Sometimes, keeping the secret of your depression can be just as difficult as the depression itself. Your friends and family may actually end up being a source of support and comfort for you. Your doctor can help you determine how best to address these concerns.

How can Kaiser Permanente help?

Kaiser Permanente can help you identify depression, learn more about it, and build coping skills to manage it better. Contact your doctor or other medical professional if you have questions or concerns.

Other resources

- Visit kp.org/depression for specialized information on managing depression.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, Healthy Living programs, and other resources.
- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, Healthy Living classes, and much more.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233; 1-800-787-3224 (TTY for hearing/speech impaired) Ndvh.org

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.