



Even the most serious depression usually responds to the right treatment.

Do you feel down or empty? Do you have trouble sleeping or eating? Are you bothered by aches and pains that don't go away? Or perhaps you care for an older person who feels this way. If you or someone you care for is depressed, there is help.

Depression is a medical condition just like heart disease or diabetes. It can affect your mind, body, and mood. It can change the way you think and feel. Depression is more than just a blue mood. It is a serious disorder that affects your daily life.

The good news is that nearly 80 percent of people who have symptoms of depression can get better with treatment. Treatment may include classes, medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of these. Even the most serious depression usually responds to the right treatment.

Common myths and facts about depression in seniors

Myth: Feeling “down in the dumps” is a normal part of growing older.

Fact: Feeling sad is normal for everyone, but long periods of depression lasting more than two weeks are not a normal part of aging. If you are sad and have no interest in things you used to enjoy, you may be depressed.

Myth: Depression is harder to treat in seniors.

Fact: With treatment, even the most seriously depressed person—no matter what age—can start to feel better and get back to a happier life. The first step is to realize that you need help, and then to ask for it. If you feel isolated, ask a friend or relative to help you make or keep an appointment with a health care professional. That way, you can get the help you need.

Myth: Depression is related to dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

Fact: Depression symptoms can look like these conditions. However, depression is not the same illness. It is a separate medical condition that requires different treatment. To make a correct diagnosis, your health care professional will do a thorough evaluation.

What causes depression?

Many things cause depression. Some contributing factors, especially among seniors, include:

- Other illnesses or disabilities
- Medications for heart problems and chronic pain
- Personal or family history of depression
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Major life events such as the loss of a loved one, retirement, divorce, or other marital difficulties (If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health, including your depression.)

Whatever the cause, depression needs to be diagnosed and treated.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

If you have five or more of the following symptoms that last for

more than two weeks, call Kaiser Permanente:

- Feeling “empty” or sad
- Giving up activities you used to enjoy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating more or less than usual
- Crying a lot
- Having problems concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Feeling guilty, helpless, or worthless
- Having thoughts about death or suicide

How is depression diagnosed in seniors?

Depression in seniors is sometimes missed or left untreated. As a person ages, others may see the signs of depression as grumpiness or irritability. Depression can cause confusion or memory problems that sometimes look like Alzheimer’s disease or other brain disorders.

Some medications used to treat high blood pressure or heart disease can cause mood changes and signs of depression. Depression is common in people who have other chronic diseases. Being depressed can make these diseases worse.

People with depression may stop taking their medications for their

chronic diseases. However, once they get treatment for depression, they can get back on track.

How can I get help?

Many people feel uncomfortable talking about depression. Some people feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness, or that a depressed person should be able to just “snap out of it.” This is not true. Depression can be serious. If left untreated, it can cause a lot of suffering. Talk to your physician or other health care professional if you think that you or someone you care about is depressed.

Self-care for depression

There are things you can do to take care of yourself:

- Set a daily schedule for sleeping, eating, bathing, and other important activities.
- Do things that you enjoy like reading or spending time with family and friends.
- Get moving. Regular exercise is good for you. Even just a little—like walking 10 to 15 minutes every day—can give you more energy, reduce stress, and improve your mood.
- Ask specifically for the kind of help you need; for example a ride to the store or someone to talk to.

- Avoid alcohol and drugs, since they can make depression worse and interfere with medications.
- Relax with deep breathing, soothing music, or meditation.

Additional resources

- Visit our Web site at kp.org. In Northern California, you can bookmark your physician’s home page at kp.org/mydoctor
- Create your own online stress management plan using our HealthMedia® Overcoming Depression™ Healthy Lifestyles and HealthMedia® Relax™ Healthy Lifestyles programs at kp.org/healthylifestyles
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.
- National Institute of Mental Health nimh.nih.gov
- Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org

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