



X-Plain *Depression*

Reference Summary

Introduction

Depression is a common condition that affects about 19 million American adults every year.

Depression has an impact on most aspects of everyday life; it affects eating and sleeping routines, self-esteem, and perspective on life. In addition, depression affects the people who love and care about the person who is depressed.

There are several available treatment options for depression. It is important to seek help for people who have depressive conditions; the consequences of not getting help can be troubling.

This reference summary will help you to understand depression and guide you toward helping yourself or someone you love who may be suffering from depression.



Depression

Feeling blue or sad is a normal reaction to stressful or sad situations in life. Some examples of situations that may lead to sadness or feeling blue include:

- Losing someone you love
- Becoming sick
- Losing a job
- Having money problems

Most people are able to overcome feeling sad and are able to cope with sadness in a constructive manner. However, some people are not able to cope very well and their feelings of sadness become overwhelming; this is a sign of depression.

Depression **is** a disease. Doctors can distinguish several types of depression, some of which are more severe than others. Treatment is available and usually successful.

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The earlier depression is diagnosed and treated, the better are the chances of recovery.

Symptoms

Sadness becomes depression when a person feels sad all the time. His or her sadness starts interfering with family life and work. The following are some of the symptoms of a person with depression. Not everyone who is depressed will experience every symptom.

- Little or no interest in activities and hobbies that are usually enjoyed.
- Sleep more than normal or have difficulty sleeping.
- Little or no interest in companionship or sex.
- Feeling worthless or hopeless and taking personal blame for everything.
- Shy away from friends and family, feeling ashamed of being depressed.
- Poor personal hygiene, not bathing or dressing nicely.



Sometimes the feelings of sadness, worthlessness, and hopelessness become so strong that a depressed person may even consider suicide.

Suicide and attempted suicide are very tragic consequences of depression. If a person ever feels like ending their life, they should call a doctor immediately.

If you realize that a loved one is contemplating suicide, you should contact a doctor immediately. The same is true if the person starts talking about hurting other people, especially people that could be to blame for his or her problems.

Treatment is available and is usually successful.

Women are twice as likely as men to be depressed. This is especially true after the birth of a baby. Depression can also affect children.

Family members may think that by ignoring depression, it will take care of itself and go away. However, since depression clouds judgment, family members or friends usually need to make the first move toward treatment.

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Causes of Depression

Combination of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors can cause depression. Major depression is often associated with changes in the brain.

The brain controls all of our activities. It controls how we move our body, speak, and understand; it also controls our emotions and feelings.

The cells of the brain, known as neurons, communicate with each other using special chemical compounds called “neurotransmitters.”

Depressed people have imbalanced neurotransmitters. Since the brain controls the whole body, people with depression may also have aches and pains that cannot be linked to any other condition.

Depression is usually triggered by a known personal problem; however, some people become depressed with no known triggering event.

Depression tends to run in families; it is often hereditary. If your parents or grandparents had depressive conditions, there is a chance that you may have them also.

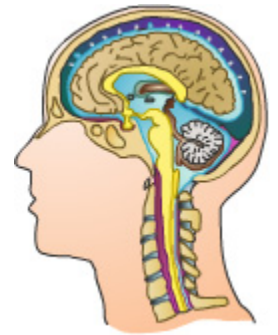
Drinking alcohol and using illicit drugs can lead to depression, since drugs and alcohol affect the chemicals in the brain. In order to recover from depression, it is necessary for the patient to stop using alcohol or illicit drugs.

Some medications, especially blood pressure medications, can lead to a chemical imbalance in the brain and depression. If this is the case, stopping these medications may be enough to treat depression. However, NEVER stop taking any medication without talking it over with your doctor first.

Only a doctor can diagnose depression. The diagnosis includes a physical examination, a complete history of symptoms, and a mental status examination.

Diagnosis

A thorough social and medical history is essential. This is followed by a physical examination to help rule out other diseases that could have symptoms similar to depression.



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Blood tests and possible brain images may be done to make sure the symptoms are not secondary to other diseases. Usually, the history and the physical examination help guide further testing.

Treatment

Fortunately, modern medicine and psychiatry is now able to treat depression fairly successfully. The choice of treatment depends on the diagnosis.

Mild forms of depression may not necessitate any medications, only psychotherapy. More advanced cases with ideas of suicide may necessitate admission to a hospital and treatment with medications.

Counseling and psychotherapy can be very helpful in treating mild cases of depression. They are often also necessary in more advanced cases along with any prescribed medications.

It may take weeks before depression medications work. Therefore, it is important to keep taking them and to not get discouraged if you don't notice results immediately.

Most antidepressants are not addictive; however, they should not be stopped all at once unless a doctor says to do so.

Antidepressants can produce side effects that may include:

- Dry mouth
- Feeling sleepy
- Difficulty starting the urinary stream
- Sexual problems



If you take antidepressants and notice any side effects, let your doctor know. He or she may change the dosage or the medication. Do NOT stop the medication on your own.

Most antidepressants do NOT mix with alcohol or illicit drugs. Therefore, it is very important not to drink alcohol or do drugs.

In some cases, counseling is also helpful to allow patients to understand and accept the initial cause of their depression.

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The FDA has approved another way to treat severe depression. This is vagal nerve stimulation. The vagal nerve is a nerve that goes from the brain to the heart, chest and abdomen. Stimulating this nerve with a low current may help some severe cases of depression.

An electric wire, a lead, is surgically implanted around the vagal nerve as it courses in the neck. The lead is connected to a battery that is placed under the skin in the upper chest area.

Electroconvulsive therapy or ECT is useful in patients with severe depression and who are slow to respond to medications.

ECT helps restore the balance of neurotransmitters by causing the brain to have a brief seizure (about 30 seconds).

ECT is done under general anesthesia and muscle relaxation. Patients do not shake uncontrollably as depicted in some movies. Patients feel no pain or discomfort during ECT. Several sessions of ECT are usually needed to help.

As a patient with depression starts to feel better, he or she will be able to make healthy changes that can reduce stress and maintain a more balanced outlook on life.

Regular exercise, healthy diet, and stable relationships are all very helpful in keeping stress low and reducing the chances of feeling depressed again.

Summary

Depression is a common medical condition. It is nothing to be ashamed of.

Treatments exist and are very effective. Medications and counseling are the cornerstones of depression therapy.

Reacting to depression as soon as it is noticed is important. With prompt treatment, a depressed person can return to a happier lifestyle and more balanced outlook on life.



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