



## Patient education: Depression (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What is depression?** — Depression is a disorder that makes you sad, but it is different than normal sadness ([figure 1](#)). Depression can make it hard for you to work, study, or do everyday tasks.

**How do I know if I am depressed?** — Depressed people feel down most of the time for at least 2 weeks. They also have at least 1 of these 2 symptoms:

- They no longer enjoy or care about doing the things they used to like to do.
- They feel sad, down, hopeless, or cranky most of the day, almost every day.

Depression can also make you:

- Lose or gain weight
- Sleep too much or too little
- Feel tired or like you have no energy
- Feel guilty or like you are worth nothing
- Forget things or feel confused
- Move and speak more slowly than usual
- Act restless or have trouble staying still
- Think about death or suicide

If you think you might be depressed, see your doctor or nurse. Only someone trained in mental health can tell for sure if you are depressed.

**See someone right away if you want to hurt or kill yourself!** — If you ever feel like you might hurt yourself or someone else, do one of these things:

- Call your doctor or nurse and tell them it is urgent
- Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1)
- Go to the emergency room at your local hospital
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
  - 1-800-273-8255
  - [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

**What are the treatments for depression?** — People who have depression can:

- Take medicines that relieve depression
- See a counselor (such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse, or social worker)
- Do both

People with depression that is not too severe can get better by taking medicines or talking with a counselor. People with severe depression usually need medicines to get better, and might also need to see a counselor.

Some people whose depression makes them feel very sad might need "shock treatment" to get better. Doctors call this treatment "ECT." During ECT, doctors pass an electric current through a person's brain in a safe way.

**When will I feel better?** — Both treatment options take a little while to start working.

- Many people who take **medicines** start to feel better within 2 weeks, but it might be 4 to 8 weeks before the medicine has its full effect.
- Many people who see a **counselor** start to feel better within a few weeks, but it might take 8 to 10 weeks to get the greatest benefit.

If the first treatment you try does not help you, tell your doctor or nurse, but do not give up. Some people need to try different treatments or combinations of treatments before they find an approach that works. Your doctor, nurse, or counselor can work with you to find the treatment that is right for you. He or she can also help you figure out how to cope while you search for the right treatment or are waiting for your treatment to start working.

**How do I decide which treatment to have?** — You and your doctor or nurse will need to work together to choose a treatment for you. Medicines might work a little faster than counseling. But medicines can also cause side effects. Plus, some people do not like the idea of taking medicine.

On the other hand, seeing a counselor involves talking about your feelings with a stranger. That is hard for some people.

**Is depression the same for teenagers?** — No. The symptoms of depression are a little different for teenagers than they are for adults. Some teenagers are moody or sad a lot of the time. That makes it hard to tell when they are really depressed. Teenagers who are depressed often seem cranky. They get easily "annoyed" or "bothered." They might even pick fights with people. Also, when treating a teenager, doctors and nurses usually suggest trying counseling first, before trying medicine. That's because there is a small chance that depression medicines can cause problems for some teenagers. Even so, some depressed teenagers need medicine. And most experts agree that depression medicine is safe and appropriate to use in teenagers who really need it.

**What if I take medicine for depression and I want to get pregnant?** — Some depression medicines can cause problems for unborn babies. But having untreated depression during pregnancy can also cause problems. If you want to get pregnant, tell your doctor but do not stop taking your medicines. The two of you can plan the safest way for you to have your baby.

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[Patient education: Neuropathic pain \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: When you have depression and another health problem \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Serotonin syndrome \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in children and adolescents \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression treatment options for children and adolescents \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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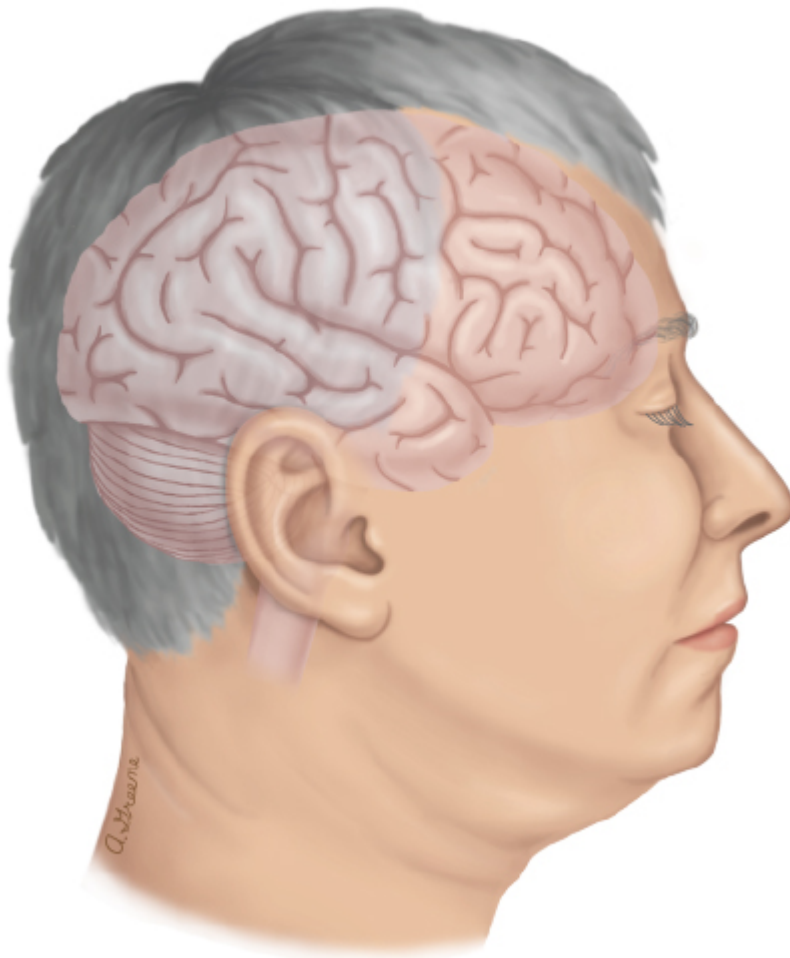
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## GRAPHICS

### Mood disorders caused by problems in the brain

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Mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder, are caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. Treatments for these conditions work by changing the chemistry of the brain.

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