

DEPRESSION

What Is Depression?

We all get 'depressed' from time-to-time. Most often these feelings are short-lived and our moods improve when things change. We get back to being our 'old selves'.

But for many people, the symptoms of Depression are more severe and last much longer – a condition known as *Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)*. MDD is very different from 'feeling down' or 'having the blues'. If left untreated for long periods, it can seriously affect sleep patterns, appetite, energy levels, and physical well-being.

Negative thoughts, a sense of helplessness or hopelessness, and always feeling sad, are symptoms of people suffering from MDD. In clinical Depression, symptoms reflect a clear change from the person's usual behaviour. In this booklet, when we mention Depression we are referring to Major Depressive Disorder.

While Depression can occur at any time, it is most common in adults between the ages of 18 and 44. Depression can start in childhood or adolescence and go unnoticed because the symptoms—moodiness, irritability, and risk-taking behaviour—are seen as common teenage problems. When Depression is diagnosed in people over the age of 55 it is called Late-Onset Depression. It is a problem that often goes unreported because it is mistaken for simply 'growing old'. Usually people who develop Late-Onset Depression have a prior history of Depression.

A common myth is that Depression affects only those who can't manage life's ups and downs or those who lack will power. This is UNTRUE. Depression is a medical illness.

The truth about Depression

- Depression is a medical illness.
- Almost 3 million Canadians have Depression.
- Roughly 20% of the general population will suffer from Depression or a related Anxiety Disorder within their lifetime.
- Depression is a life long illness that often comes and goes.
- Depression is a treatable illness.

It is important to understand that it is not your fault you feel this way, and that help is available. Talk to your doctor or visit the organizations listed at the end of this booklet

What causes Depression?

Although the cause of Depression is not fully understood, researchers believe that Depression involves a chemical imbalance in the areas of the brain that regulate mood and emotion.

Researchers have found a number of factors that seem to increase the risk of being diagnosed with Depression: a close relative that has been diagnosed with Depression or an Anxiety Disorder; major life events such as death in the family; or job loss or retirement.

Women are more than twice as likely to develop Depression as men. Again the reason for this is unknown; however it is not uncommon for Depression in women to coincide with the hormonal changes of menstrual periods, pregnancy or after giving birth. However, Depression can happen at any time in a woman's life.

It is important to understand that Depression can be triggered by a number of physical illnesses such as heart disease, thyroid disease, or arthritis. Visit your doctor and tell them about all your symptoms, to determine if your Depression is caused by a physical illness. If you are diagnosed with Depression your doctor will work with you to find the right treatment for you.

The presence of depressive or anxiety-related symptoms such as constant fatigue, difficulty sleeping or concentrating may require treatment. Only your doctor can determine the cause of your Depression and tailor the right treatment for you.

How can I tell if I have Depression?

Some things to look for if you think you may have Depression are:

- **Changes in your mood:** small things bother you, you feel sad all the time or you take less pleasure in things you once enjoyed (such as hobbies, family activities, etc.). Sometimes Depression is experienced as intense irritability.
- **Changes in your physical well-being:** increase or decrease in appetite and weight, changes in sleeping patterns (trouble sleeping or waking up, excessive daytime sleepiness, or frequent awakenings at night), low energy levels, lack of motivation, headaches, or general aches and pains.
- **Changes in your thought patterns:** negative thoughts, trouble concentrating or paying attention, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, guilt or pessimism. Often a person with Depression will suffer from low self-esteem or low self-confidence.

If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, take the Depression self-test. If you answer "Yes" to 5 or more of the questions, show the test to your doctor, you may have Depression. Remember only your doctor can determine if you have Depression.

A Self-test for Depression

Check off the symptoms you have had nearly every day for the past 2 weeks.

Have you been feeling sad, depressed or down most of the time?

Yes No

Have you felt tired or without energy most of the time?

Yes No

Have you had trouble sleeping or do you sleep too much?

Yes No

Have you found it difficult to concentrate or make decisions?

Yes No

Have you had an increase or decrease in appetite or weight?

Yes No

Have you had feelings of worthlessness or guilt?

Yes No

Have you felt frightened or panicky for no apparent reason at all?

Yes No

Have you felt restless and found it difficult to sit still?

Yes No

Have you been feeling anxious or worried?

Yes No

Have you felt like you just cannot go on, or had thoughts of death or dying?

Yes No

If you checked off 5 or more of the symptoms on this self-test you may have Depression.

If you have had recurring thoughts of death or suicide, contact your doctor regardless of how you have answered the other questions.

I think I have Depression. What do I do now?

If you have Depression it is important to understand that it is not your fault, and that there is help available. Depression is a treatable medical illness. It is important to be patient – it may take some time for your treatment to work, or to find the best treatment for you.

If not treated properly by a doctor, Depression can last for months or even years. Depression can lead to difficulties in your personal, social, or work life. If you think you have Depression, it is important to see your doctor immediately.

Your doctor will want to give you a thorough physical examination to rule out the possibility of any other physical illnesses. As well, you can expect to be asked about any medication or drugs that you may currently be taking.

It is not uncommon for people with Depression to use and abuse alcohol and drugs as a way of coping with their sadness. But it is important to understand that alcohol and drugs can often make a depressed person feel even worse. Be sure to talk to your doctor about all your symptoms and about all medications, alcohol, or drugs you may be taking.

A word about Suicide

The anxiety and distress of Depression can be so severe that some people think about hurting themselves or committing suicide. If you have had these thoughts or are having them now, **see your doctor immediately**. Help is available.

It is important to realize that thinking about suicide is not shameful; it is part of the illness. Share all of these thoughts with your doctor. He/she can help you through this period and may give you medications that can ease the pain and make you feel better or he/she may recommend psychological therapy to help you discuss your situation.

Is it possible to have other illnesses as well as Depression?

The vast majority of people with Depression also have accompanying symptoms of anxiety such as excessive worrying, nervousness, restlessness, panicky feelings, difficulty falling asleep, or physical complaints such as headaches or muscle tension. In fact, these symptoms can be so severe that sufferers often seek help from their doctor for anxiety or a physical complaint, only to discover that the key problem is Depression.

The most common illnesses associated with Depression are: [Generalized Anxiety Disorder](#), [Social Anxiety Disorder](#) (Social Phobia), [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder](#) (OCD), [Panic Disorder](#), [Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#), and drug or alcohol abuse.

The more illnesses a person has, the more difficult treatment becomes. But don't be discouraged, there are treatment options that can treat the different disorders associated with Depression at the same time.

It is therefore important to tell your doctor about all your symptoms so a proper diagnosis and treatment can be made.

A word about Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is a scary, confusing illness that affects the way you think and feel. GAD is a medical illness that causes you to worry so much, about so many different things, that you begin to feel anxious all the time. Soon, the worry is all you can think about and it may become the centre of your life.

Although most people worry about one thing or another at different times in their life, these worries generally do not interfere with their day-to-day routines or bother them for very long. But for those suffering from GAD, everyday problems become a source of constant anxiety and worry that takes over their lives. For some, there is a constant fear that something "bad" will happen at any moment. People suffering from this disorder usually expect the worst, worrying excessively about money, health, family or work, even when there are no signs of trouble.

Many sufferers are plagued with severe muscle tension in their neck, back, and shoulders. Other physical symptoms often accompanying GAD include trembling, twitching, headaches, irritability, sweating and, in some cases, hot flashes. GAD patients often have trouble concentrating, tend to feel tired all the time, and may startle easily. Most people with GAD are unable to relax and often suffer from insomnia. It is not unusual for GAD sufferers to have difficulty keeping a job, staying in relationships, or maintaining friendships.

Because of the constant fear that something "bad" will happen at any moment, people with GAD often become depressed.

A word about Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia)

It is almost impossible to go through a single day without seeing or talking to another person. But for the thousands of Canadians suffering from **Social Anxiety Disorder** the thought of having to interact with others is frightening. Those suffering from **Social Anxiety Disorder** are afraid that they may do or say something "stupid" in front of others. They often avoid eating, drinking or writing in public places because of the fear that they will do something to embarrass themselves. **Social Anxiety Disorder** patients often go out of their way to avoid many different social situations. They often experience a great deal of anxiety prior to a known upcoming social or public event, which often leads to irrational thoughts about losing control, which in turn, causes them to fear the situation even more.

Because of their fear of embarrassment, people with Social Anxiety Disorder often isolate themselves from others. This isolation often causes them to feel depressed.

A word about Panic Disorder

Up to 4 people in every 100 will experience episodes of intense, over-whelming fear that reaches a peak within 10 minutes and comes on suddenly and unexpectedly. During these attacks, it is not unusual to feel that you are having a heart attack, are being suffocated, or are going crazy. During these periods, people often say they have heart palpitations, a rapid heart beat, and shortness of breath or choking. There may also be sweating, nausea and diarrhea, trembling and shaking during these attacks. As well, the person may describe a sense of things being unreal, or that they feel detached from themselves. These symptoms together are known as a panic attack. When a person has repeated and unexpected panic attacks, they are diagnosed as having [Panic Disorder](#).

After a person has experienced even one or two attacks, there can be great anxiety and worry about when the next attack will occur. Some people with Panic Disorder end up developing [agoraphobia](#), which is the fear of being in situations where escape might be difficult or in which help may not be available. This is because after a [panic attack](#), the person learns to fear having another attack in the same place or in a location where it would be difficult to get help. If agoraphobia becomes severe enough, the person may become housebound and unable to perform normal daily activities.

[Panic Disorder](#) is often misunderstood. People with the disorder may spend months or years trying to find an explanation for what they feel are mysterious physical symptoms. Others won't seek treatment because they are embarrassed, think their condition is just due to stress, or they are afraid of what the doctor will diagnose.

Because of their constant fear of having a panic attack, people with Panic Disorder often isolate themselves from others.

A word about Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

[OCD](#) is a two part medical illness. The first part involves worrying excessively about something (an obsession), which in turn often causes a great deal of anxiety or distress to the person. The second part of [OCD](#) involves the intense need to do something to help get rid of the anxiety caused by the obsession; this is called a compulsion or compulsive behaviour.

Obsessions are described as unwanted, disturbing ideas or impulses that occur spontaneously and often don't make sense to the person or to the people around them. Common examples of obsessions are: persistent fears of contaminating by dirt or germs, thoughts of being responsible for harm to one's self or others, or the fear of forgetting to do something.

Compulsions are the behaviours (rituals or routines) that people with [OCD](#) are compelled to do, to help control the anxiety associated with their obsession. For example a ritual for someone who has a fear of contamination may involve washing their hands repeatedly, in many instances to the point that their skin is sore and raw. Other people have rituals that involve checking and rechecking, such as checking to see that the door is locked. Some people with [OCD](#) often recognize and understand that their behaviour is

unusual and unreasonable, but by performing their compulsions they gain temporary relief from their anxiety.

A word about Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

[Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#) (PTSD) is a serious psychiatric disorder that affects thousands of people each year. In fact, in any given year 5% of the population can expect to suffer from [PTSD](#). Although, once thought to only occur in war veterans, we now understand that [PTSD](#) can develop in anyone who has experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, such as being in a car accident.

1 out of 2 people will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.

Although we all deal with traumatic events differently, many people do not suffer any adverse effects from a traumatic event. However there are people who will experience or witness a traumatic event and continue to re-experience the event over and over again, sometimes for months or years. They may begin to avoid situations or conversations that remind them of the traumatic event. They may have problems getting to sleep or staying asleep. They often startle easily and may seem “overly” alert like they are anticipating another traumatic event. For these people the trauma never seems to end – they have [PTSD](#).

People with [PTSD](#) may become depressed because of what they witnessed or experienced, or they may become depressed because they feel as if they have been unable to cope as well as others in the same situation.

It is important to understand that the medical illnesses associated with Depression are treatable. Talk to your doctor about all your symptoms and how they make you feel. There are medications and treatments that can treat Depression and the medical illnesses associated with Depression.

A word about Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Often, people suffering from Depression will use drugs or alcohol to feel better. It is important to understand that alcohol and drugs can cause greater anxiety and deeper depression, which can make the situation worse.

The long-term effects of drug or alcohol abuse can be very damaging to your physical health and well-being. It can also be very disruptive to your family, friends and other relationships. When talking to your doctor, be honest about any drug or alcohol use. Drugs and alcohol can seriously affect the effectiveness of the treatment your doctor prescribes for you and can lead to dangerous side-effects.

There are treatments that can help you with drug and alcohol abuse. Talk to your doctor about which treatments are best for you.

What kinds of treatment can help me?

Depression is sometimes caused by medication that you may be taking for another medical condition (such as heart or thyroid disease, or arthritis). For these reasons, your doctor will want to give you a thorough physical examination. If your Depression is not due to some other medical condition, your doctor will discuss with you the various treatments that are available to you. There are two types of treatments available for Depression: medications and psychological therapy.

Medications

There are a number of different medications that are used to treat Depression. Newer antidepressant medications, known as Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) for example, are very effective at treating Depression and many of the anxiety disorders associated with Depression at the same time.

However, as with all medications, it is important to understand the side-effects associated with different medications. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are experiencing any side-effects, often he/she can help reduce or eliminate the different side-effects you may be experiencing.

It is important to tell your doctor if you are currently using any drugs or alcohol as they can interact with different medications, and can in some cases make you very sick.

Treatment for Depression is a long-term process, but with medication, your symptoms will begin to lessen and you will start to feel better within a few weeks. Once your medication starts to work, it is important to keep taking it to ensure that symptoms don't come back. If you stop taking it too early, you may create unpleasant symptoms – symptoms that are avoidable. **Never stop taking your medication without first talking to your doctor.** If your doctor decides to stop therapy, he/she will explain the best way to do that.

Psychological therapy

Many people benefit from adding one or more psychological therapies to their medications. Psychological therapies can help you manage your feelings of Depression and anxiety by giving you the coping skills to deal with your symptoms.

Various therapies can reduce the pain and suffering caused by Depression. Many different types of therapy may help and it is very important to have a good relationship with your therapist. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Interpersonal Therapy have been found to be very effective in the treatment of Depression.

Remember, the earlier you get treatment, the sooner you can begin to feel better. As with other illnesses, if you delay getting help, your Depression may become more difficult to treat. People who are treated for Depression may begin to feel better within a few weeks, but don't be discouraged if it takes you a little longer. And even if the first treatment isn't successful, other options are available.