

What is Depression and How is it Treated?

An Online Guide

Depression is not simply feeling low.

Everyone feels down from time to time, as a normal part of dealing with life's difficulties. But when your low mood won't lift or you start to feel worse, it's possible you are experiencing depression.

Depression is often misunderstood. In fact, it is a formally diagnosable and treatable medical condition. Most people experience depression as a persistent low mood, but the condition can also include stronger emotional and physical symptoms.

If left untreated, depression can impact many different aspects of a person's life, and to different degrees of severity. For example, from difficulty remembering simple things to being unable to function normally on a daily basis.

The best advice is to seek help from a healthcare professional. With the right treatment, most people improve their symptoms and enjoy a better quality of life.

Symptoms of depression

Depression presents differently in each individual, there are common symptoms.

Non-physical symptoms might include:

- Persistent low mood
- Loss of interest in work, hobbies or other activities you previously enjoyed
- A desire to isolate yourself from others, or intolerance of others
- Feelings of hopelessness or despair
- Loss of sex drive
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of motivation
- Feelings of guilt

Physical symptoms might include:

- Regular oversleeping, insomnia or disturbed sleep
- Fatigue or decreased energy
- Unexplained aches, pains, headaches, digestive problems, constipation
- Loss of concentration or inability to make decisions
- Loss of appetite or overeating

If you are experiencing these or other unexplained symptoms, or feel you may be depressed, talk to your doctor. If you experience symptoms most of the time, every day, for longer than two weeks, it's time to seek help.

If your symptoms are severe or you feel you are at risk, take action now.

Contact emergency services – dial 111 in the UK.

Find your [local crisis support service](#).

Causes of depression

The first question many people with depression ask themselves is: how did I get here?

There's no single cause of depression, and it can occur for many reasons.

Depression can be triggered by a significant event, such as job loss, divorce or bereavement, which can then affect other aspects of your life. Depression can also have less easily defined causes, such as living circumstances, old age, a family history of depression, a physical injury, and many others:

- **Major life events** – the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of employment, giving birth, or some other major upheaval
- **Personal circumstances** – living isolated from friends or family or in difficult social or financial circumstances
- **Alcohol and drugs** – despite the short-term “fix” of making you feel better, alcohol is classed as a depressant, and drugs can affect aspects of your life which can then worsen depression symptoms.
- **Personality traits** – a tendency to be overly self-critical or suffer from low self-esteem may increase the risk of developing depression.
- **Family patterns** – you may be more likely to develop depression if a close family member has experienced it previously
- **Other health problems** – long-term health issues such as heart disease or cancer increase the risk of developing depression. Hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid) and minor head injuries are other possible causes.

If you feel you need help and are unsure who to contact, start with your GP.

Diagnosing depression

To get a diagnosis, your doctor will ask lots of questions about your circumstances, and how your symptoms are affecting you on a day-to-day basis. The key is to be open so your doctor can help you.

Conversations with your healthcare professional remain confidential.
You should feel completely free to discuss your concerns with them.

Depression is usually diagnosed as mild, medium or severe. Your doctor will then recommend treatment, or perhaps refer you to another healthcare professional for next steps.

Treatment for depression

Depending on the severity, treatment for depression can include lifestyle changes, talking therapies, medication, or a combination.

Mild depression

Your doctor may recommend a range of accessible self-help treatments:

- **Watchful waiting** – taking a wait-and-see approach and seeing your GP again in two weeks
- **Talking to a trusted friend or family member** – this can help you to open up about your feelings
- **Looking after your physical health** – exercising, eating properly and getting enough rest are all suggested to help depression and its symptoms
- **Support groups** – talking to other sufferers, either in person or online
- **Mental health apps** – these might include meditation or mindfulness applications
- **Social interaction** – meeting friends and doing things you enjoy

Mild to moderate depression

If your mild depression is not improving or it's diagnosed as moderate, your doctor may refer you for talking therapy to suit your situation.

The more common treatments for mild to moderate depression include:

- **Counselling** – a form of spoken therapy with a recognised professional to discuss current issues in your life and try to find positive solutions
- **Psychotherapy** – longer-term spoken therapy with a recognised therapist to explore your psychological history, identify emotional issues, and the background to problems and difficulties
- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** – a spoken therapy that focusses on identifying and changing destructive or disturbing thought processes that can contribute to more debilitating states such as depression and anxiety.

Severe depression

For severe depression, your doctor may prescribe medication such as antidepressants or refer you to other mental healthcare professionals for next steps.

Or they may recommend a combination of both medication and talking therapies.

What to do next and where to find help

[Learn more about depression.](#)

Contact your GP or [find one online.](#)

Contact [mental health services in your area.](#)

Explore [social services and support groups in your area.](#)