DEPRESSION IN WOMEN

What is depression?

It's common for people to feel sad, lonely, or angry when they're going through a rough time. They might have trouble sleeping, and they might not want to do things they usually enjoy. But when these feelings last a long time, it could be depression.

How does depression affect women?

Depression affects people differently. For example, some people just feel unhappy, but they don't know why. Other people have symptoms that are more severe, like thoughts of suicide. How often these symptoms happen and how long they last can also vary among different people.

Depression is a very common condition. In fact, about 1 in 10 people in the United States has depression. Women are about twice as likely to have depression as men are. There may be several reasons for this, such as:

- **Biology.** Genes and biology may increase a woman's chances of having depression
- **Hormones.** Hormones are linked to emotions and mood. Experts believe that hormone changes may be one cause of depression in many women
- **Culture.** Some aspects of our culture may add stress to women's lives. Examples include managing a job and a household at the same time and being a caregiver. As a result, women may be more likely to have depression

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Symptoms of depression in women

Men and women experience depression in different ways. For example, among people with depression, women are more likely than men to feel sad, guilty, or worthless. Men are more likely than women to use alcohol or drugs, avoid family and friends, and become angry and aggressive.

Depression can be treated

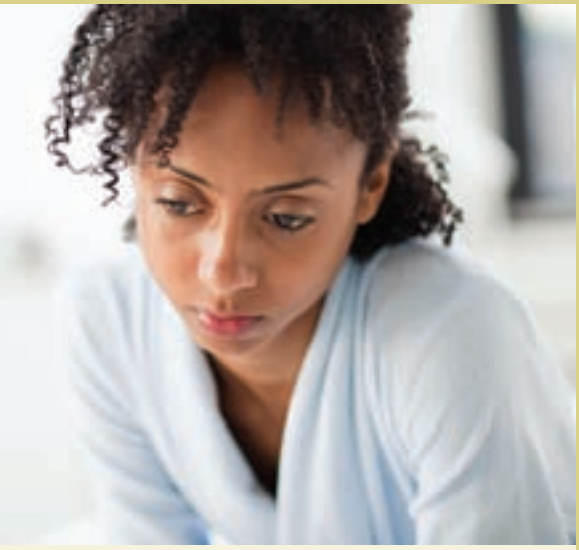
There isn't a lot you can do to prevent depression, but it's important to know that depression can be treated. In fact, over 80% of people with depression are able to get the treatment they need to help them feel like themselves again.

There are many options for treating depression. Most people do best by using these 2 options in their treatment plan:

- **Talk therapy.** With talk therapy, you speak with a mental health counselor about your thoughts, feelings, and mood. This can help you understand your depression so that you can deal with it better
- **Medicines.** Depression is often treated with medicines called *antidepressants.* Medicines affect people in different ways. That's why you might need to try a few antidepressants before you find one that works best for you. Your health care provider may change your dose, ask you to try a different medicine, or add another medicine to the one you're currently taking.

DEPRESSION IN YOUNG WOMEN

Hormones change often throughout a woman's life, especially in women in their teens, 20s, and 30s. For example, hormones shift when a woman has her period and during and after pregnancy. Experts believe these hormone changes may be a cause of depression in some young women.



Depression related to your period

You've probably heard of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). There are many symptoms of PMS. Most of the symptoms start about a week before your period and end around the time your period begins. Some of the most common symptoms are:

- Feelings of anxiety, tension, or sadness
- Crying spells
- Anger or irritability
- Changes in appetite
- Trouble falling asleep
- Avoiding being with other people
- Trouble concentrating
- Fatigue, or tiredness
- Headache or joint and muscle pain
- Stomach problems (constipation or diarrhea)

"I dread the first week of every month, right before my period. It's as if my personality totally changes, and I get angry about the silliest things. My mom said she used to feel the same way when she had her period. She told me it's just part of being a woman. But I don't want to go through this anymore."

—Kate,* 21

What is PMDD?

Some women have a more severe form of PMS, called *premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD).* You might have PMDD if you notice the symptoms listed here.

- Having mood swings
- Being irritable (getting angry very easily or quickly)
- Feeling sad, hopeless, or worthless
- Feeling anxious, tense, or "on edge"

Causes and risk factors of PMDD

Experts don't know what causes PMDD, but hormone changes during menstruation may play a role. Other factors may be:

- Having a psychiatric disorder (such as anxiety or severe depression)
- Abusing alcohol
- Being overweight
- Drinking a lot of caffeine
- Being the daughter of someone who has had PMDD
- Lack of physical activity

Depression during and after pregnancy

Pregnancy and childbirth cause many hormonal and physical changes in a woman's body. These changes, plus the responsibility of taking care of a new baby, can be very stressful. Experts believe these are the reasons many women get depression after they have a baby.

Many women have "baby blues" for up to a week after they have a baby. They may cry often, have trouble sleeping, and not feel like eating. But postpartum depression (PPD) is more serious. The symptoms are similar to those of baby blues but are usually more severe and last longer. If you have PPD, you may also have:

- Thoughts of hurting your baby
- Thoughts of hurting yourself
- No interest in your baby

Risk for PPD

More than 1 of 10 women will experience PPD within the first year after they have a baby. Some women are more likely to have PPD than others. Your risk for PPD is higher if:

- You have had depression or another mental illness in the past
- Someone in your family has had depression or another mental illness
- You don't have help or support from family and friends
- You have had bad feelings about your pregnancy
- You had problems with a pregnancy before
- You have abused drugs or alcohol
- You are having problems with money
- You are having problems with your husband or partner

Getting help for PPD

Some women with PPD may feel ashamed or embarrassed. They may feel guilty about being sad when they think they should be happy about having a baby.

If you have PPD, there is no reason for you to suffer. Talk with your health care provider. He or she may suggest that you try talk therapy, medicine, or a combination of these treatments.

These are some more things you can try:

- Rest whenever your baby is sleeping
- Don't try to do everything yourself. Ask your friends, family, and other loved ones for help
- Take some time to do things you enjoy, either alone or with loved ones
- Don't hide your emotions. Instead, talk with loved ones about how you're feeling
- Talk with other mothers. You can talk with people you know, or you can ask your health care provider about local support groups. Talking with people who have been through something similar can remind you that you're not alone. You can also share helpful tips
- Most changes—even changes for the better—cause stress. Try to avoid making big changes or big decisions during your pregnancy or shortly after your baby is born

Talk with your health care provider about the best treatment options for you and your baby if you are pregnant or are breast-feeding. If you are taking medicine to treat PPD, don't stop taking it before you check with your health care provider. Not taking medicine that you need could harm you or your baby.

DEPRESSION IN MIDDLE AGE

Most women stop having a monthly period when they are in their 40s to early 50s. This change in a woman's life is called *menopause*. Once a woman finishes menopause, she cannot get pregnant. About 8 to 10 years before menopause, the body makes less of some kinds of hormones. This stage before menopause is called *perimenopause*.

During perimenopause and menopause, hormone changes can cause many symptoms. Periods may be heavier, lighter, or less frequent than usual. Other symptoms include:

- **Hot flashes—**a sudden feeling of warmth in the upper body
- **Night sweats—**sweating that can make you soak through your bedclothes
- **Vaginal dryness—**which can make sex uncomfortable or painful

These stages of life can also cause emotional symptoms. Many women may have mood swings, get annoyed easily, or feel sad. For some, this time of life can also cause feelings of anxiety or loss. Also, there is a higher risk for depression during middle age and perimenopause.

"People call it the change of life, but I'm not ready for all these changes. My body looks different, and I feel as if I'm in a funk every day. I just want to be back to my plain old self again. Instead, I feel just plain old!"

—Anna,* 52

Getting help

If you think you might have depression, talk with your health care provider. Getting help as soon as you notice symptoms of depression can help you start feeling better faster.

Treatment for depression that happens during menopause is usually the same as treatment for depression during other stages in life. Using talk therapy and medicine together works best for most people. For some women, adding hormone therapy to the treatment plan might also help.

DEPRESSION AS YOU GET OLDER

Getting older is a time of many changes. For many people in their 60s and beyond, it can be the happiest time of their lives. They look forward to retirement, when they no longer have to go to work every day and can spend time with their grandchildren. But for others, it can be a sad and difficult period. The death of a loved one, moving out of the family home, or finding out they have an illness can be hard for some people to cope with.

Is what you're feeling just part of aging?

It's normal to feel sadness and grief when these changes happen. But when these feelings don't go away, they can be signs of depression. At times, though, older people and their loved ones don't recognize these signs. One reason for this is that people sometimes assume that the symptoms of depression are really symptoms of other medical conditions, such as:

- Dementia
- Alzheimer's disease
- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Heart disease
- Parkinson's disease
- Stroke
- Problems with the thyroid gland

Some people think that depression is a normal part of aging. But that's not true. Just like diabetes or high blood pressure, depression is a serious medical illness that needs to be treated. When depression isn't treated, it can increase the risk for other kinds of illness. And depression itself can get worse when it is not treated.

Depression in caregivers

In the United States, the role of caring for a sick or elderly loved one at home is usually filled by a woman. While being a caregiver can be rewarding, it can also cause health problems. For example, a woman who is middle-aged or older and who is the caregiver of her spouse is more likely to have symptoms of depression or anxiety than is a woman who is not a spouse's caregiver. A woman of that age who cares for a parent is also more likely to have those symptoms. Being a caregiver can be associated with physical health problems, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

If you're a caregiver, it's important to take steps to prevent those problems. Here are some things you can try:

- Take a break from your loved one by doing things you enjoy with other special people in your life
- Join a support group for caregivers. You can learn helpful tips for coping, and it can remind you that you're not alone
- Take care of yourself! Eat healthy foods, and try to be active. Just be sure to talk with your health care provider before you change your activity level
- Consider talking with a counselor to help you understand and deal with your own emotions

"I love my husband, but sometimes I'm so busy taking care of him that I forget to take care of myself. It's just him and me, all day every day. And then I feel guilty for resenting him."

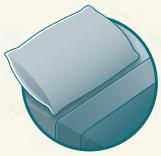
—Maria,* 71

Taking care of yourself when you have depression

Medicine and talk therapy are usually effective ways to treat depression. Keeping balance in your life is another way to help yourself feel better. Here are some things you can try.

These are some things to help your body:

Eat right. Every day, eat a variety of healthy foods. Try to fit lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains into your day.



Sleep well. Getting too much sleep or not enough sleep can affect your mood. Try to wake up at the same time every morning and go to bed at the same time each night. If you have trouble sleeping at night, avoid sleeping during the day. Daytime naps can make it hard for you to fall asleep at night.

Be more active. Being active can improve your mood and your general health. It can also give you more energy and help you sleep better. Talk with your health care provider before you change your activity level.

These are some things to help your mind:

Find support. It might be helpful to talk with people who have had depression. Talk with a friend who has gone through something like what you're feeling now. You can also ask your health care provider about local support groups. You can share helpful tips for coping, and it can remind you that you're not alone.

Reach out. Talk with friends, family, and other loved ones. Show interest in how they're doing and what's going on in their lives.

Get involved. Having a hobby may help give you a feeling of pride and success. Think of things you used to enjoy, and start doing those things more often. Or try something new! You can take classes, do volunteer work, or get involved with local activities or groups.

Tracking your progress

As you continue with your treatment, it might be hard for you to notice the small changes each day that show you're getting better. The table below will help you keep track of your progress. **Every day, put a check in the box next to each thing that is true for you that day.** There is a blank space at the end of each category (Symptoms, Treatment, Lifestyle) for your own ideas. There are also blank spaces at the bottom of the table where you can write about your mood, important things that happened, or anything else you want to keep track of. Share your results with your health care provider or counselor at your next appointment.

	DAY OF THE WEEK						
Symptoms	**S**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**
I feel tired/I'm having trouble sleeping	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel sad, hopeless, or anxious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I've been having crying spells—I cry, but I don't know why	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I'm having mood swings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel guilty, and I blame myself when things go wrong	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have trouble concentrating	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Treatment							
I took my medicine	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I went to talk therapy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I attended my support group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lifestyle							
I ate healthy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I did something active	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I spent time with a friend/family member	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My own ideas							
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Remember—depression is common in women, and the symptoms can be different as you get older. Talk with your health care provider about changes you notice that bother you. Together, you can figure out a plan that can help you feel like yourself again.

For more information about depression, visit or call:

Postpartum Support International: www.postpartum.net or 1-800-944-4PPD (1-800-944-4773)

The North American Menopause Society: www.menopause.org/home or 1-440-442-7550

*People depicted are hypothetical.

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