

What You Should Know About Depression

Jane P is a 30-year-old woman with three children, who works as an accountant. She is always tired and irritable. She feels fortunate to have three healthy children, a responsible and loving husband, and a good job, yet she is upset with herself for being unable to appreciate them.

Mary T is a 22-year-old woman with three young children. Their father has left her, and she survives on welfare benefits and lives in public housing. Her own mother has a drug problem and has moved to another state. Mary T has seen her health care provider four times in the past 2 months for recurring headaches and abdominal pain. Physical examinations, laboratory tests, and X-rays have found no explanation for these problems.

Sarah M is a 40-year-old secretary with two teenagers. She recently saw an advertisement for an antidepressant medicine on television. She hadn't thought of herself as being depressed, but the description made her wonder. She has never been a very enthusiastic or energetic person. She does what she has to do, but there is nothing she particularly looks forward to and no leisure activity she really cares about. Her own mother

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was the same way. She always thought her feelings were normal until she saw the commercial.

Vanessa V is a junior in college. She was doing well academically and socially until she discovered 2 months ago that her boyfriend was cheating on her. After crying for 24 hours, she closed herself in her room and sleeps most of the time. She doesn't wash and set her hair or go to class. Periodically, she emerges to pay for a pizza delivery or stock up on potato chips and cookies. Her room is littered with the empty containers, and she has gained 10 pounds.

What do all these women have in common? They are all suffering from a common and treatable illness: depression.

What Is Depression?

Depression is on its way to becoming the most common illness in the world, and women are twice as likely as men to suffer from it. In any 1-year period, nearly 10 in every 100 Americans—about 19 million people—suffer from depressive illnesses. One in four women will experience depression in their lifetime.

Despite these statistics, depression is still misunderstood by many women and underdiagnosed by health care providers. One reason for this is that most women don't think of depression as an illness (like they would diabetes or high blood pressure), or as a condition that can be treated and controlled. Health care providers may not think about depression when, like Mary T, women come in repeatedly with unexplained aches and pains.

All women have days when they feel sad, tired, or irritable for no reason. Depression, however, causes feelings of sadness, sleep and appetite problems, or other distressing conditions that can last for weeks, months, and years. Depression is not “all in your head,” and it responds well to treatment. Over the years, research has shed light on what causes it and has produced effective medications and “talking therapies” to relieve the pain of depression for millions of women.

Depression Symptoms

Not every woman who is depressed has all of the symptoms in the list below. However, if you have any of these for 2 weeks or more, you may wish to see your health care provider.

- Sad, anxious or “empty” feelings
- Hopeless and pessimistic feelings, like life is not worth living
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness; feeling that family, friends, and the world would be better off without you
- Loss of interest or pleasure in once-enjoyable hobbies and activities, including sex
- Fatigue, decreased energy, or a sense of being “slowed down”
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Sleep problems, such as trouble falling asleep, waking up early, or sleeping “all the time”
- Changes in appetite or eating, including overeating or no interest in eating; weight gain or loss.
- Thinking about death or suicide; attempts to harm yourself

Depression

- Feeling restless and irritable for no apparent reason
- Persistent physical symptoms for which your health care provider can find no reason.

Getting Help

If one or more of the symptoms in the list fits you, a friend, or a family member, the first step is to seek help. Your regular health care provider—doctor, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, or nurse midwife—is a good place to start. He or she should be able to evaluate you and either treat you or refer you to someone who can. If you know someone who may be depressed, offer to help them make and keep an appointment with a health care provider. Depressed women may not have the energy to make and keep an appointment or may not believe they can be helped.

If you don't have a regular health care provider, you still have options. Many employers offer an employee assistance program that provides confidential mental health services. Health Maintenance Organizations often provide mental health services without requiring a referral from your primary care provider—check your statement of benefits. Other sources include referrals from local medical or psychiatric societies, public or private hospitals, clinics, and clergy. If you have no health insurance or are concerned about your ability to pay, check your city or state Department of Human Services. Many cities offer mental health services that charge according to your ability to pay.

Treating Depression

Your treatment will depend on what type of depression you have, how severely it affects your life, what is available in your community, what you can afford, and your own preferences. A thorough evaluation includes questions about you and your family's past medical problems (depression often runs in

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families), your current symptoms, present or prior use of drugs and/or alcohol, and any thoughts about harming or killing yourself. Search your memory carefully when answering these questions as your answers will help guide your treatment. You may also have blood tests done to check for medical conditions that can resemble or cause depression, such as an underactive thyroid gland.

Because chemical imbalance in the brain may cause depression, medication to correct the imbalance is often suggested. Medications are used because of their desirable effects—improving depression and making life easier and more enjoyable—but for some women, they may also have side effects such as sleepiness or dry mouth. Most of the side effects get better over time. It is impossible to predict which medications will work best and have the fewest side effects in any one person. You may need to try several before finding the best one for you. Medication may take a while to work completely, so don't be discouraged if you don't feel better right away. Also, discuss how long you should continue taking the medication. Stopping too soon can cause your depression to return.

Psychotherapy, either in combination with medication or by itself, is helpful for many women. This involves talking with a mental health professional to gain insight into your life and

symptoms, and to learn new ways of coping. Psychotherapy is often short-term, measured in weeks or months. You may be given “homework assignments” between sessions with your therapist.

You may have heard about alternative therapies, such as the herb St. John's Wort. There are very few studies to show whether this or other so-called natural remedies are useful or safe, and herbs can have serious side effects or interfere with other medications. Let your health care provider know if you are taking any herbal remedies. For more information about complementary/alternative treatments for depression, consult the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Web site (see Resources box below).

In Summary

If you see yourself in Jane P, Mary T, Sarah M, Vanessa V, or in the symptom checklist, remember that depression is an illness that can be successfully treated. Help is available, and you can feel better. Even if you are tired and discouraged, don't give up until you get the care you need.

Resources

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm

American Psychiatric Association

http://www.psych.org/public_info/

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

<http://nccam.nih.gov/>