

# Depression

---

**C**linical depression (also referred to as major depression or major depressive disorder) is a serious condition that affects millions of Americans every year. It is significantly different from the periods of sadness or feelings of grief that occur as an expected part of life for most people. Although it is normal to be sad or “down” occasionally and to experience grief when a significant loss occurs, clinical depression has more severe symptoms, often lasting for a long period of time, and is more likely to have an impact on a person’s ability to function normally.

It is estimated that during any given month almost 5 percent of Americans will experience an episode of major depression, and the lifetime prevalence is more than 17 percent. When other depressive conditions such as bipolar disorder and persistent depressive disorder are included, the estimate of lifetime prevalence exceeds 20 percent. In other words, one of every five Americans will experience at least one episode of depression at some point in his or her life. Females are generally thought to be twice as likely as males to experience major depression, but no group is exempt from this painful illness. Depression can be found among the young and the old, the religious and the nonreligious, and all ethnic and racial groups.

Depression is not only painful but can also greatly impair a person’s relationships and ability to work productively. In many cases, it is a life-threatening condition, placing people at risk for death from suicide or physical conditions such as heart disease.

The most common symptoms of depression are:

- Depressed mood with overwhelming feelings of sadness and grief; and/or irritable mood
- Loss of interest and pleasure in activities formerly enjoyed
- Noticeable changes in appetite and weight (significant weight loss or gain)
- Insomnia, early morning waking, or oversleeping
- Restlessness or being physically slowed down
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness, guilt or hopelessness
- Difficulty concentrating or thinking, indecisiveness
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

A formal diagnosis of major depression is given when a person has experienced five or more of these symptoms every day or almost every day during a two-week period, and at least one of the symptoms is depressed or irritable mood or loss of interest or pleasure in activities previously enjoyed.

Although major depression is a serious illness that can have a devastating impact on a person’s life, the good news is that there are effective treatments, including medications (most of which can be prescribed by a primary care provider) and psychotherapy.