

Depression in Older Adults

- What is a Depression?
- Treatment Options
- Common Signs of Depression

What is Depression?

Anyone may experience periods of sadness or low mood brought on by life's events.

But if such a mood persists over time, whether originating from a specific event or for no apparent cause, the possibility of "clinical depression" or "major depression" should be considered.

Depression is one of the most common illnesses faced by Americans. It affects all age groups, including older adults. Yet depression often goes undetected.

What Causes Depression in Older Adults?

As is true for people at any age, depression in older adults can be brought on by a number of causes. These may be *physical*, *social*, or *psychological* in origin. They include:

- Specific events in a person's life, such as the death of a spouse or child, a change in circumstances, or a health problem that limits activities and mobility
- Medical conditions, such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, hormonal disorders, heart disease, or thyroid problems

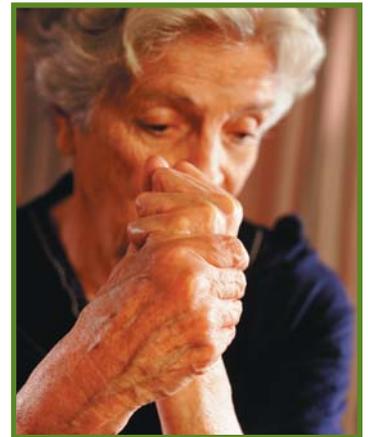
- Chronic pain
- Nutritional deficiencies, including a lack of such vitamins such as B-12 and folic acid
- A genetic predisposition to the condition
- A chemical imbalance in the brain
- Medication side effects; the effects of a combination of drugs; or overmedication.

A Careful Diagnosis

Depression in older adults can become worse if not properly treated, so an accurate diagnosis is very important. A thorough examination by a physician or other qualified professional is the first step.

The goals of such an evaluation typically include:

- ruling out the possibility of other medical disorders



Depression in later life is common—but not "normal"

- identifying the cause of the depression
- determining whether changes in medications, nutrition, or lifestyle might improve the situation.

Just as depression can be brought on by other physical or medical conditions, it may also resemble other illnesses. For example, many of the symptoms of depression (such as memory lapses, problems with concentration, lack of energy, or loss of interest in former pastimes) are sometimes mistaken for signs of Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of dementia. Indeed, people with depression are sometimes misdiagnosed as having Alzheimer’s.

There is no substitute for qualified professional assistance in identifying and treating clinical depression.

What are the Treatment Options?

The good news is that depression is treatable. And although clinical depression affects many older adults, it should not be accepted as just another part of the aging process. Sometimes, people are hesitant to talk about depression or to have it diagnosed and treated. They prefer to “keep the problem inside.” But treatment for depression can make a big difference in a person’s health status and overall quality of life.

Treatment can include one or more of the following approaches:

Psychotherapy

Talking with a mental health professional may help a person understand the causes of depression. And it may aid in changing negative thought patterns and developing coping skills.

Medications

Several types of medications can be effective in treating clinical depression. When properly prescribed and used, these drugs often have a dramatic effect. But they may also have side effects, so careful monitoring is important.

Environmental Changes

Often, a depressed person has low self-esteem and feels out of control of his or her life. When this happens, a change in routine, new activities, or an exercise program may help the person remain involved and active. Support from family, friends, or a support group of people dealing with the same kinds of issues can reinforce opportunities for success and self-affirmation.



Depression may be brought on by a specific event, such as the death of a spouse or moving from a long-time home.

Where to Turn for Help

A person’s doctor is always a good place to start. He or she may then make a referral to a private mental health specialist, a community mental health center, or other available resources. If the person is hesitant to seek assistance for such problems, the physician can also provide reassurance that depression is a relatively common condition that can and should be treated.