

# What Women Need to Know about Depression



**L**ife is full of emotional ups and downs. However, when the “down” times are long lasting or when they get in the way with your ability to function, you may be suffering from a common, serious illness—depression. Clinical depression affects mood, mind, body, and behavior. Research has shown that in the United States about 19 million people suffer from depression. Treatment can alleviate the symptoms in over 80 percent of the cases. Yet, because it is often not recognized, depression continues to cause unnecessary suffering.

Although depression affects both women and men, women experience depression at roughly twice the rate of men. Researchers continue to explore how special issues unique to women—biological, life cycle, and psychosocial factors—may be associated with women's higher rate of depression. Yet, the specific causes of depression in women remain unclear. Many women exposed to these conditions do not develop depression. Regardless of the contributing factors, depression is a highly treatable illness.

## What is depression?

Depression affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself, and the way you think about things. A depressive disorder is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. The right treatment, however, can help most people who have depression. The symptoms of depression vary from person to person, and the

strength of the symptoms depends on the severity of the depression. Depression causes changes in thinking, feeling, behavior, and physical well-being.

## What are the types of depression?

**Serious depressions**—see your doctor or other health care professional right away!

**1. Major depression** is the most common and serious type of depression. It has a distinct beginning, can occur once, twice, or be recurrent. This condition affects a person's abilities and habits in almost all areas of life. Suicidal thinking or suicide attempts can be a real concern. If you have a major depression, you may have some of these symptoms nearly every day, all day, for 2 weeks or longer:

- Feeling sad or crying a lot
- Losing interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy (including sex)
- Feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless
- Thinking about death or suicide
- Sleeping too much, or not being able to go to sleep or stay asleep
- Losing your appetite and losing weight (or eating too much and gaining weight)
- Feeling very tired or slowed down
- Having trouble paying attention and making decisions
- Having aches and pains that don't get better with treatment

**2. Bipolar illness** involves cycles of depressive symptoms that alternate with mania. During manic episodes, people may become overly active, talkative, euphoric, and irritable.

3. **Postpartum depression (PPD)** is prevalent in approximately 10% of mothers in the first year after giving birth. PPD is caused by a rapid change in hormones after giving birth. In its mild form, it is called the “baby blues.” If it lasts over a month, it can become very serious, endangering both the health of the mother and the baby.

### Other mood disorders

- **Dysthymia** is a chronic mild depression. People with dysthymia frequently lack a zest for life, living a joyless and fatigued existence. Some with dysthymia report that “things are going great” in their life and do not understand why they are depressed. Major depression may accompany dysthymia, which is sometimes termed “double depression.”
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** is a kind of depression that occurs during the specific seasons or times of the year when there is less sunshine.
- **Premenstrual dysphoria disorder (PDD)**—previously called PMS—is a condition which causes women to experience mood changes in the weeks prior to their menstrual period, due to hormonal changes.
- **Situational depression** is the feeling of situational blues after a specific event such as conflict at work, a specific loss (such as a death or divorce), or a particular financial stress.

### What are the causes of depression?

We do not know the exact causes of depression in women, but research has focused on the following factors: genetic factors (a family history of depression), biochemical factors (hormonal changes), environmental stressors (significant loss, a difficult relationship, and major change), previous trauma (childhood abuse or witnessing a violent act), and other

psychological and social factors (negative thinking, low self-esteem, worry).

### What are treatments for depression?

Treatments for depression include: education, counseling or psychotherapy (individually or in a group), and medication. It is also important to take good care of yourself, to exercise regularly, and to eat healthy foods: Often, these self-care activities can be helpful in improving your mood. If you are experiencing more severe symptoms, you may want to consider psychotherapy, medications or both. Be sure to talk with your health care provider to find the treatment that is best for you. Antidepressant medications are very effective in treating depression. There are many different kinds of antidepressants. You and your doctor can decide which one is right for you. Medications alone or medications with counseling can help most women who have depression.

### Some Do's and Don'ts when you're depressed

Be sure to:

- Call Kaiser Permanente or talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner if you think you might be depressed.
- Exercise every day to make yourself feel better and to get more energy.
- Eat balanced meals and healthy food, and get enough rest.
- Make an effort to stay in touch with your loved ones and friends, your religious or spiritual advisor, and your family doctor.
- Take your medicine as directed and/or go to counseling as often as your doctor advises.
- Set small goals for yourself, and encourage yourself, because you may have less energy.
- Get as much information as you can

about depression and its treatment.

- Call your doctor or the local suicide crisis center right away, if you start thinking about suicide.

Try *not* to:

- Make major life decisions (for example, about separation or divorce). You may not be thinking clearly right now, so your decisions may not be the best ones for you.
- Blame yourself for your depression or feel ashamed. Depression can be a way that your body is letting you know that it is time to focus on caring for yourself.
- Be discouraged about not feeling well right away. Be patient with yourself.
- Give up.

### How can Kaiser Permanente help?

Kaiser Permanente offers a variety of ways to help you identify whether you suffer from depression, learn more about the condition, and acquire coping skills necessary to manage your symptoms. Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, treatment options available through our Medicine and Psychiatry Departments, and other resources.

Online, connect to the Kaiser Permanente Web site at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org). The site offers a special featured health topic section on depression, a personalized stress management program, HealthMedia RELAX<sup>®</sup>, a message board for online support, and listings of classes, recommended resources, and much more.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.