

# **Depression in Women**

## **Is depression common in women?**

Yes. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, more than 19 million people in the United States -- 1 in 10 adults -- experience depression each year. Women are twice as likely as men to experience depression. In fact, more than 6 million women experience depression each year.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Doctors continue to learn about how women are affected by depression, but there are some common symptoms. If you're depressed, 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

## **What causes depression?**

Depression seems to be related to a chemical imbalance in the brain that makes it hard for the cells to communicate with one another. Stressful life events, such as the death of a loved one, a divorce or moving (such as leaving home to go to college), may lead to depression. Taking certain medicines, abusing drugs or alcohol, or having other illnesses can also cause depression.

Women with premenstrual syndrome (PMS) are more likely to become depressed. Depression is more common a week before a woman's period and in the weeks after a woman gives birth (this is called postpartum depression). In some women, taking birth control pills may cause symptoms of depression.

## **How is depression treated?**

Depression can be treated with counseling, medicine or both. It's also important to take good care of yourself, to exercise regularly and to eat healthy foods. See the list of dos and don'ts later in this handout. Counseling alone may help if the depression isn't severe.

Antidepressant medicines are very effective in treating depression. There are many different kinds of antidepressants. Your doctor will decide which one is right for you. Medicine alone or medicine with counseling can help most women who have depression.

### **Some dos and don'ts when you're depressed**

- Don't isolate yourself. Stay in touch with your loved ones and friends, your religious advisor, and your family doctor.
- Don't 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.
- Don't blame yourself for your depression. You didn't cause it.
- Don't be discouraged about not feeling well right away. Be patient with yourself.
- Don't give up.
- Do exercise every day to make yourself feel better and to get more energy.
- Do eat balanced meals and healthy food, and get enough sleep.
- Do take your medicine and/or go to counseling as often as your doctor tells you to. Your medicine won't work if you only take it once in a while.
- Do set small goals for yourself, because you may have less energy.
- Do encourage yourself.
- Do get as much information as you can about depression and its treatment.
- Do call your doctor or the local suicide crisis center right away if you start thinking about suicide.

### **Are antidepressants safe for any woman with depression?**

If you're planning to get pregnant, talk to your doctor about your medicines before you try to get pregnant. If you accidentally get pregnant while you're taking an antidepressant, tell your doctor right away. Your doctor will know if your medicine is safe to take.

Almost all medicines for depression can pass into your breast milk. If you are planning to breast feed or you currently breast feed, talk to your doctor about your medicine.

In most cases, it's OK to take birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy (also called HRT) at the same time as depression medicines. Taking hormones may even help some depressed women feel better. However, if your birth control pills seem to be causing symptoms of depression, discuss this with your doctor. He or she may suggest you use another method to prevent pregnancy for several months in order to find out if your birth control pills are causing depression.

## **Do antidepressants have side effects?**

Like most medicines, antidepressants can cause side effects. However, not all people taking antidepressants experience side effects. Any side effects you have will depend on which medicine your doctor has chosen for you.

If you're taking a tricyclic antidepressant, you may have a dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, a "spacy" feeling, bladder problems, tiredness, sleepiness, dizziness, shaky hands, fast heartbeat or weight gain.

If you're taking a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), you may have nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, nervousness, sleepiness or trouble sleeping, or problems with sex (inability to have an orgasm).

Other antidepressants can cause similar side effects. If a side effect of your antidepressant bothers you, talk to your doctor about it.

## **How will I know if an antidepressant is helping?**

You'll sleep better. Your appetite will improve, and you'll have more energy. You'll have a better feeling about the future. You'll feel less sad, and it will be easier to make decisions. Be patient -- you may notice improvement as soon as 1 week after you start taking an antidepressant, but you probably won't see the full effects for about 6 to 8 weeks.

## **How long will I need to take the medicine?**

How long you'll need to take the medicine depends on your depression. If this is the first time you've been depressed, your doctor will probably want you to take the medicine for about 6 months. If this is the second time you've been depressed, you'll probably take the medicine for about 1 year. However, if this is the third or fourth time you've been depressed, you may need to take the medicine for years so the depression doesn't come back.

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