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## What Is Depression?

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### Summary:

Depression is more than just feeling down. It is a significant mood disorder that needs to be treated before more serious problems develop.

### What Is Depression?

Depression and other [mood disorders](#) are serious problems that need immediate attention. Approximately one in ten Americans suffers from a mood disorder which keeps them from leading a normal life. Depression is often referred to as the “common cold of mental illness”. Approximately one out of every two American families will have a member who suffers from depression. Nearly half of individuals experiencing symptoms of depression go undetected – and worse – untreated.

Depression is a [mental health problem](#) that is deeper than sadness – it is painful and can be debilitating. Much like heart disease or diabetes, depression is a legitimate medical illness that has genetic and biological causes.

Characteristics of depression can include disturbances in feelings, thinking and behavior; and ranges from moderate to severe. It not only takes a toll on the patient, but it impacts their family as well. The results can be severe and cause emotional, behavioral and financial problems.

Depression is akin to other types of mood disorders in that some forms of depression are experienced by only a select group, while other types can be experienced by anyone. The following are the most common kinds of depression.

1. *Major Depressive Disorder*: This mood disorder is characterized by a depressed mood, lack of interest in activities, weight change, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty concentrating and thoughts of death or suicide.
2. *Dysthymic Disorder*: This is a mild to moderate state of depression. The patient will often feel low, but will not experience the extreme depression that other sufferers feel.
3. *Bipolar Illness*: This mood disorder is characterized by alternating periods of elevated moods or manic episodes, and depression. Manic episodes can range from mild mania – also known as hypomania – to severe and debilitating highs.
4. *Postpartum Depression*: The dramatic hormone shifts associated with pregnancy can affect a woman’s mood after her child is born. This disorder is more commonly known as the “baby blues”. It can range from symptoms that go away on their own to postpartum psychosis. Any depressed feelings or mental health problems that occur after childbirth should be reported to a doctor immediately.
5. *Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)*: This mood disorder is characterized by depression, sleepiness, weight gain and carbohydrate cravings during the winter months. These feelings will disappear when spring returns.

6. *Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)*: This mood disorder is generally associated with irritability, fatigue, anxiety, nervous tension, mood swings, feeling overwhelmed, appetite changes and aches. It can occur anywhere from several days to two weeks before menses and will subside with the onset of the menstrual period. These symptoms are only considered PMDD when they are severe, but any patient experiencing symptoms that disrupt her normal life should talk with her doctor.

Depression can coexist with another mental illness or physical ailment. In some cases, an illness will precede depression, while in others it is a consequence of the depression. Mental health centers that are familiar with co-occurring disorders treatment are best qualified to handle these problems.

Often anxiety disorders, including post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive compulsive anxiety disorder (OCD), panic disorder, social phobias and generalized anxiety disorders accompany depression. Physical ailments – such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes and Parkinson's disease – can also occur in combination with depression. Often people who experience depression and another physical ailment will suffer more severe symptoms associated with that medical problem. Treating depression in conjunction with the disease or illness is the best approach.

If you or a loved one has symptoms that seem like depression, seek help immediately. From adolescent depression to adult depression, it is imperative the patient find assistance before this mood disorder causes additional problems. Don't forget – with the right treatment, depression is treatable; recovery and remission are possible!