

Depression- More than just the Blues

We all at points in our life have feelings of sadness, disappointment, and/or grief. Life is unpredictable and when it disappoints us, especially when dealing with a loss, it's natural to feel down. However, there is a big difference between feeling down and suffering from depression. When the sadness persists and interferes with daily activities, such as sleeping, working, socializing and simply enjoying life, one may be dealing with major depression, an illness that frequently requires treatment.

There are several signs and symptoms that a physician or psychologist looks for before diagnosing someone with depression. If one has had at least five of the following symptoms for most of the day, nearly every day, for more than two weeks, depression may be present:

- Feelings of sadness, depressed mood, and/or irritability
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities, such as hobbies or spending time with family/friends
- Changes in weight or appetite
- Changes in sleeping pattern- sleeping too much or too little
- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- Inability to concentrate, remember things, or make decisions
- Constant fatigue or loss of energy
- Restlessness or decreased activity
- Recurrent thoughts of suicide or death

If you or someone you know is experiencing these symptoms, please keep in mind that depression is a treatable illness and having depression is not a sign of weakness. Depression is an illness just as diabetes and arthritis are illnesses. As with many illnesses, it can become much worse if the proper care isn't received. That's why taking the first step, contacting a physician or psychologist, is so critical.

Risk Factors

A risk factor is something that increases the likelihood of developing a disease or condition. Although it is possible to develop depression without specific risk factors, the more risk factors one has, the greater one's likelihood of developing depression. Risk for depression may be related to a combination of genetic, physical, psychological, and environmental factors. The following are potential factors that might contribute to the development of depression:

- Family history of mental illness
- Chronic physical disorders
- Major life changes and stress
- Psychological factors
- Having little or no social support
- Low financial resources

- Being female
- Being elderly

People with a family history of depressive disorders are at increased risk for developing depression. Those who have or had other medical illnesses such as a stroke, heart attack, cancer, Parkinson's disease, and hormonal disorders are also at an increased risk. Some patients with depression also have anxiety disorders. Many people with depression experience anxiety symptoms such as agitation, difficulty sleeping, and excessive worry.

Stressful changes in life patterns have also been found to trigger depressive episodes. Such stressful events may include a serious loss, a difficult relationship, trauma, or financial problems. Regarding age and gender, women are at a higher risk and experience depression twice as often as men do. There are many additional stresses that women are frequently faced with having responsibilities at both work and home, being a single parent, and caring for children and aging parents. As for age, the elderly are at particularly high risk for depression. However, depression can occur at any age.