

## health notes

### Depression: Your doctor can help

**F**eelings of discouragement, frustration, and despair are normal reactions to bad news or loss of a loved one that can last from a few hours to a few days before disappearing.

However, when these bad feelings won't pass after a couple of weeks and begin to interfere with work and family, reducing your overall quality of life, the low mood is usually a sign of depression. This information sheet is designed to help you take an active role, as a partner with your doctor, in your depression treatment.

Depression can affect anyone – children, teens, seniors, men and women, rich or poor, of any background. You may be depressed if you have any of the following symptoms nearly everyday, all day, for more than 2 weeks:

- No interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy
- A low mood that lasts longer than is normal for you
- Trouble sleeping through the night, or wanting to sleep all the time
- Wake up feeling down and don't want to get out of bed
- Feeling anxious, worthless, or guilty
- Chronic fatigue or inability to get motivated
- Frequent crying
- Change in appetite leading to weight loss or weight gain
- Trouble thinking, remembering, focusing on what you're doing, or trouble making everyday decisions

- Have thoughts of suicide, or thoughts of "ending it all"
- Drinking heavily or using drugs to get through the day

#### Causes of depression

Depression can be caused by a multitude of things: it can be caused by chemical imbalances in the brain that make it hard for the cells to communicate with each other; it can be part of your family history; or it can be linked to stressful events in your life such as the death of someone you love, a divorce, or job loss. Certain medicines, overuse of drugs and alcohol, and chronic diseases can also lead to depression. Depression is not caused by personal weakness, laziness, or a lack of willpower – it is a medical illness, and it can be treated.

#### Treatment

Sometimes depression will eventually disappear without any medical treatment, but it could take many months or years. Since there is no sure way of predicting when an episode of depression may end, it is best to take action sooner rather than later. If you're having symptoms of depression, be sure to tell your doctor, who can work with you and recommend the appropriate treatment.

Once your doctor has assessed the severity of your depression, treatment may include medicine, psychotherapy, and self-management. Any one of these treatments, used alone or in combination, may give you the best results.

### **Antidepressant Medication**

Medications for depression are called antidepressants. Antidepressant medication can be very effective for many people with depression and is the most widely used treatment. It may take some time to find the medication that works best for you. Antidepressants are not addictive, but some people experience mild side effects at the start of treatment. You may notice some effects of the antidepressants as soon as one week after you start, however, the full effects won't be seen for about 6 to 8 weeks. Talk with your doctor about any concerns you may have.

### **Psychotherapy**

Certain types of psychotherapy such as *cognitive behavioural therapy* (CBT) and *interpersonal therapy* (IPT) can be as effective as antidepressants. Psychotherapy may focus on your general outlook, on your relationships, or it may focus on your behaviour – how it's affecting you and what you can do differently to improve your situation. Sessions usually take place individually or in a group about once or twice a week for 8 to 12 weeks. Ask your doctor to recommend a therapist or program that will meet your needs.

### **Early treatment can:**

- Stop the depression from getting worse and can shorten its course
- Help prevent depression from reoccurring
- Allow you to have a more enjoyable, normal life

### **Self-Management**

Recognizing the symptoms of depression and seeking professional help is the best way to begin to help yourself. Throughout treatment there are many things you can do to help yourself get through your depression and reduce the risk of relapse. Self-management does not mean dealing with your depression alone – it means being an active partner with your doctor or health care provider, communicating honestly with him or her, and being well informed on treatment options. Most importantly it means following through on the entire treatment plan that you and your doctor decide upon – which usually includes changes to your lifestyle and the way you look at things.

### **There are many things you can do during your depression to help improve your state of mind and overall health:**

- Spend time with and seek the support of friends and family
- Set small, realistic goals that don't require a great deal of responsibility
- Don't expect too much from yourself too soon, as this will only add pressure
- Spend as little time alone as you can, since being with other people usually makes you feel better
- Avoid making important decisions until you are feeling better. If you must make a big decision, ask someone you trust to help you
- Regular, strenuous physical activity will not only make you physically healthier, but will also improve your mood. But consult your doctor about an exercise program if you have health problems

## health notes

### Resources

**Self-Care Depression Patient Guide**, a 44-page booklet published by the University of British Columbia, can help you overcome depression by helping you make important changes in the way you think and the way you act. The booklet can be downloaded free from [www.changeways.com/selfcaremanual.pdf](http://www.changeways.com/selfcaremanual.pdf), or call the Department of Psychiatry, UBC at (604) 822-7314.

**Changeways**, group workshops that teach a variety of problem solving and lifestyle management skills, are offered by most mental health centres in BC. Ask your doctor about these groups.

**Canadian Mental Health Association (BC)** can be reached at [www.cmha-bc.org](http://www.cmha-bc.org) or (800) 555-8222, (604) 688-3234.

**Mood Disorders Association of BC** can be reached at [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net) or (604) 873-0103.

### Online resources

**NHS Direct Online (UK)** depression website is aimed at answering your questions about depression – regardless of whether you are a patient, a friend, or a relative of someone with depression. It can be found at [www.nhs.uk/conditions/depression](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/depression).

**National Institute of Mental Health (US)** website talks about the symptoms of depression, and depression with other illnesses. The address is [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression).

© British Columbia Medical Association

This information is also available as a printed pamphlet, along with pamphlets on other health topics, at [www.bcma.org](http://www.bcma.org)

*This information is provided as a supplement to your doctor's care, and while we have made every effort to ensure its accuracy, it is not a replacement for medical advice. Please contact your doctor with any questions.*