

What is Depression?

Depression is a common illness. It is more common than hypertension or diabetes. The lifetime occurrence of depression in any country is between 8% to 10%. Contrary to common belief it is not an illness of developed countries alone. It occurs in developing countries like ours just as commonly as in other countries. The World Health Organization and the World Bank studied the disability that diseases bring and found that Depression is the fourth most disabling disease in the world. It is predicted that in 2020 it will rise to being the second most disabling disease. The World Health Organization also estimates that more people die from suicide than from Tuberculosis deaths in the Asia Pacific region. The most common cause for death by suicide is Depression.

There are numerous direct and indirect costs that are lost due to depression. These costs include costs due to inability to work, health utilization costs and cost to families who have to look after and support their family members suffering depression. Depression occurs more in women than in men in a ratio of 1:2. There are many postulates to this and some of them include that women may be more willing to discuss their emotional issues. Women have hormonal changes that may increase the risk of depression. Also men may self-medicate their depression with alcohol or drug use.

Symptoms of Depression

The symptoms of depression can differ greatly, but victims suffer low moods and lose interest and enjoyment in aspects of life, feeling sad and anhedonia. Anhedonia is the inability to derive pleasure from pleasurable activities. An example of this is when a person who enjoys gardening, just can't find the mood to do anymore gardening.

Other symptoms include a general feeling of tiredness, changes in weight and loss of appetite, fatigue, sleep disturbance, lack of interest in sex, irritability, anxiety and confusion, poor concentration, a feeling of loneliness, hopelessness, uselessness, and worthlessness, guilt feelings and suicidal thoughts.

Physically, patients can complain of a variety of conditions like back pain, headaches, giddiness, gastric problems and chronic pain.

Depression is different from normal sadness as a diagnosis can only be made if a patient has at least five of the symptoms described above and it has lasted continuously for at least two weeks. The symptoms are significant enough to cause social and occupational impairment as well. There are

various medical conditions that can also cause or that may occur concurrently with depression and these need to be ruled out.

The apathy which accompanies depression often stops sufferers from seeking help.

Causes of Depression

Depression may be triggered by major life events such as the death of a relative or friend. Stressful situations such as divorce, financial difficulties or job loss can also trigger depression. Depression can sometimes be caused by a person's lifestyle. Childbirth can also trigger post-natal depression in women, as can loneliness, especially in the elderly.

Over the past 20 years, scientists have been investigating the way in which some chemicals in the brain affect a person's mood. One of these chemicals is serotonin – depressed people are often found to have an imbalance in the way that serotonin works in their brains.

Genetics predisposition

Some types of depression run in families, indicating that a biological vulnerability can be inherited. This seems to be the case with manic-depressive illness. Studies of families, in which members of each generation develop manic-depressive illness, found that those with the illness have a somewhat different genetic makeup than those who do not get ill. However, the reverse is not true: not everybody with the genetic makeup that causes vulnerability to manic-depressive illness has the disorder. Apparently additional factors, possibly a stress environment, are involved in its onset.

Major depression also seems to occur, generation after generation, in some families. However, it can also occur in people who have no family history of depression. Whether the disease is inherited or not, it is evident that individuals with major depressive disorder often have too little or too much of certain neurochemicals.

People with low self-esteem

Psychologic makeup also plays a role in vulnerability to depression. People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism, or who are readily overwhelmed by stress are prone to depression.

Serious or chronic physical illness

Serious or chronic physical illness or major surgery may trigger depression, too. Some commonly prescribed medications, including some cardiovascular drugs, hormones, birth control pills and drugs used to treat Parkinson's disease, may also bring on depression, or make it worse.

Other causes include:

- Stressful environment
- Adverse life events
- Lack of a supporting relationship

Very often, a combination of genetic, psychologic and environmental factors is involved in the onset of a depressive disorder.

Sometimes there are no know triggers at all. Depression can appear suddenly, for no apparent reason.

Whatever the trigger, treatments are available that many have found to be safe and effective.

Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help over 80% of those who suffer from depression.