

Depression

As in adults, depression can happen in adolescents and children. Your child may feel sad most or all of the time, which interferes with his or her everyday activities. Depression in children is sometimes related to a certain life event, but not always. Effective treatments for depression in children are available.

What is depression?

Depression is feelings of sadness and hopelessness that are present much of the time and interfere with daily activities. Everyone feels sad now and then, including children. However, if your child is sad most of the time, is not engaging in usual play or other activities, and is having other problems such as sleeplessness or loss of appetite, he or she may have some form of depression.

If your child has symptoms of depression, it is important to get medical help. Your doctor or mental health professional can evaluate your child and recommend appropriate treatment, which may include psychotherapy, medication, or both. Treatment can help your child recover from an episode of depression and get back to his or her normal mood and activities.

What does it look like?

- Feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Depressed children may seem more irritable than sad.
- Loss of interest in activities your child used to enjoy. For example, rather than playing with friends, your child may become withdrawn.
- Frequent crying, often for no reason.
- Low energy—feeling tired all the time.
- Doing worse or poorly in school.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Eating too little or too much; losing or gaining weight.
- Feeling worthless and/or feeling guilty for no or little reason.
- Some depressed children act passively or are clingy; others are aloof or withdrawn.
- Thinking or talking about death or suicide.
- Other symptoms are possible: as happens in adults, depression may take many different forms in children.

What causes depression?

There is no single cause of depression. Genetic factors, social factors, and life experiences probably all play a role.

What are some possible complications of depression?

- Suicide, particularly in depressed adolescents. If your depressed teen talks about committing suicide, call your mental health professional or doctor's office immediately!
- Especially when it is not treated, depression can become a chronic or recurrent problem that interferes with all aspects of life: job, family, relationships.



What puts your child at risk of depression?

- Depression is common, occurring in up to 2.5% of children and 8% of teens.
- In teens, it is more common in girls than in boys.
- Depression often occurs with other mental health disorders, including anxiety, behavior disorders, learning disorders, or substance abuse.
- If you or others in your family have had depression, your child may be at higher risk.
- Depression may follow some type of loss in your child's life, for example, a death or family disruption.

Can depression be prevented?

There is little that can be done to prevent depression in children.

How is depression treated?

- If depression is suspected, we may recommend evaluation by a mental health professional, such as a child and adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist. Having such a professional meet and talk with your child can help in assessing whether your child is depressed, how severe the depression is, and what factors may be contributing to it.
- Depression may be classified in different ways:
 - *Major depression*: episodes of severe depression, sometimes bad enough to require psychiatric hospitalization.
 - *Dysthymia*: depression that is less severe but sometimes more persistent.
 - *Bipolar disorder*: depression alternating with episodes of overexcitedness and overactivity (formerly called "manic-depression").
- Even if your child does not fall into any of these categories, depression can be an important problem requiring evaluation and treatment by medical or mental health professionals.

- *Hospitalization* is sometimes needed for children or adolescents who are very depressed, especially if they have attempted suicide, have serious thoughts about committing suicide, or have other severe symptoms.
- *Medications* are an important part of treatment for depression. Your doctor or mental health professional can prescribe drugs to help reduce your child's feelings of sadness or helplessness.
 - Especially for teens with depression, it is important to balance the expected benefits of antidepressant drugs with the potential risk of suicide. Depending on the medications used, it may take several weeks before your child's depression starts to improve.
 - Your child will be monitored closely while receiving antidepressant medications.
- *Psychotherapy* is often helpful for depressed children. Talking to a mental health professional can help your child understand factors affecting his or her feelings and how to manage depression in everyday life.
- If other mental health problems are present (for example, anxiety or drug or alcohol abuse), these will need to be evaluated and treated as well.

- Treatment may also include family therapy, parent management training, and involvement in your child's school. Specific treatments depend on many factors, including the severity of your child's depression, the situation at home, and other accompanying problems.
- Your child should receive follow-up exams or sessions to see how his or her depression is responding to treatment. Depression can be a chronic or recurrent problem, especially without proper treatment and follow-up.

When should I call your office?

- Call your mental health provider if your child's symptoms of depression get worse, if they don't start getting better with treatment, or if they return after treatment.
- If you cannot reach your mental health provider and you're concerned about these or other problems, call our office.
- If your depressed teen talks about committing suicide, call your mental health professional or doctor's office immediately. If you cannot reach anybody, take your child to the emergency room. 