



Even the most serious depression usually responds to the right treatment.

Are you a senior who feels down or empty? Do you have trouble sleeping or eating? Are you bothered by aches and pains that don't go away? Perhaps you care for an older person who feels this way. If you or someone you care for is depressed, we can help.

Depression is a real disease, just like heart disease or diabetes. It can affect your mind, body, and moods. It can change the way you think and feel. Depression is more than just a blue mood. It is a serious disorder that affects your daily life.

The good news is that nearly 80 percent of people who have symptoms of depression can improve with treatment. Treatment may include classes, medications, psychotherapy, or a combination of these. Even the most serious depression usually responds to the right treatment.

Common myths

Myth #1: Feeling “down in the dumps” is a normal part of growing older.

Fact: Feelings of sadness are normal for anyone, but long periods of depression (for more than 2 weeks) are not a normal part of aging. If you are sad and have no interest in things you used to enjoy, you may be depressed.

Myth #2: Depression is harder to treat in seniors.

Fact: With treatment, even the most seriously depressed person – no matter what their age – can start to feel better and get back to a happier life. The first step is to realize that you need help, and then to ask for it. If you feel isolated, ask a friend or relative to help you make or keep an appointment with a health care professional. That way, you can get the help that you need.

Myth #3: Depression is related to dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

Fact: Depression symptoms can be the same as with these conditions. However, depression is not the same illness. It is a separate medical condition that requires different treatment. To make a correct diagnosis, a health care professional will do a thorough evaluation.

Diagnosing depression in seniors

Depression in seniors is sometimes missed or left untreated. As a person ages, others may see the signs of depression as grumpiness or irritability. Depression can cause confusion or memory problems that sometimes look like Alzheimer’s disease or other brain disorders.

Even some medications used for high blood pressure or heart disease can cause mood changes and signs of depression. Depression is common in people who have other chronic diseases. Being depressed can make these diseases worse.

People with depression may not take their medications for their chronic diseases. However, they can get treatment for depression and get back on track.

Signs and symptoms

If you have 5 or more of the following symptoms that last for more than 2 weeks, call Kaiser Permanente:

- Feeling “empty” or sad
- Giving up activities that you used to enjoy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating more or less than usual
- Crying a lot
- Problems concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Feeling guilty, helpless, or worthless
- Having thoughts of death or suicide

Causes of depression

Many things cause depression. Some contributing factors, especially among seniors, are:

- Other illnesses or disabilities
- Medications for heart problems and chronic pain
- Personal or family history of depression
- Major life events (loss of a loved one, divorce or other marital difficulties, retirement)
- Alcohol or drug abuse

Whatever the cause, depression needs to be diagnosed and treated.

Asking for help is the first step to feeling better

Many people feel uncomfortable with the subject of depression. Some people feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness, or that a depressed person should be able to just “snap out of it.” These ideas are not true. Depression can be serious. If left untreated, it can cause a lot of suffering. Talk to your personal physician or other health care professional if you think you or someone you care about is depressed.

Self-care for depression

- Set a daily schedule for sleeping, eating, bathing, or other important activities.
- Do things that you enjoy like reading, or spending time with family and friends.
- Get moving. Regular exercise is good for you. Even just a little, such as 10 to 15 minutes of walking per day, can help give you more energy, reduce stress, and improve your mood.

- Avoid alcohol and drugs, since they can make depression worse and interfere with medications.
- Relax using deep breathing, soothing music, or meditation.
- Practice making specific requests. Ask for what you need, and get help.

Additional resources

Web sites

- Visit our Web site at kp.org. In Northern California, you can bookmark your physician’s Home Page at kp.org/mydoctor
- National Institute of Mental Health nimh.nih.gov
- For a customized online stress management plan, check out our HealthMedia[®] Relax™ Healthy Lifestyles program at kp.org/healthylifestyles.

Books

- *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*

Phone numbers

- Suicide Prevention Hotline
1-800-SUICIDE
(1-800-784-2433)

Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.