

Caring for Older Family Members with Depression

What is depression?

Depression is a constant sad or “blue” feeling that lasts for two weeks or more. People who are depressed often lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. Other signs include feeling nervous, guilty, or very tired. Depression can make it hard to make choices. It can affect your appetite and weight. It also can cause thoughts of death or suicide.

Who gets it?

Anyone can have depression. It is as common in older people as in younger people. In most cases, it is not known what causes it. But, people who need to be in a hospital or nursing home for care may be more likely to be depressed. It is also more common in people who have brain conditions, like Alzheimer disease or a stroke.

How is it diagnosed?

If you have an older family member who may have depression, it is important for him or her to see a doctor. The doctor will ask about symptoms of depression. The doctor also may ask the patient to fill out a survey. The score on the survey can show whether your family member has depression.

Are there other conditions that can look like depression?

Other conditions, such as an underactive thyroid or anemia, can have similar symptoms to depression. Medicines taken for other illnesses may cause side effects, such as sad feelings. Drug or alcohol abuse may cause a sad, uninterested appearance. The death of a loved one normally causes feelings of depression, but these should be temporary.

How is it treated?

Depression can be treated with medicine or behavior therapy, but there is not one treatment that works for everyone. Sometimes, it takes time to find the right medicine or for behavior therapy to begin working. Regular aerobic exercise helps mild depression and is good for everyone. If the depression is severe and does not respond to medicine or behavior therapy, the doctor may recommend electroconvulsive therapy. This treatment uses an electrical pulse applied to the head while the patient is under anesthesia. This treatment can be life-saving for someone who is suicidal. Prompt treatment is important for improving your family member’s life, so make sure he or she sees a doctor.



Caring for Older Family Members with Depression *(continued)*

How can I help?

The support of family and friends makes a big difference in how a person with depression gets better. The first step is making sure your family member gets help. If medicine is prescribed, make sure he or she takes it regularly. Help him or her report any side effects, and be sure he or she continues to get checkups. Tell your family member that depression is nobody's fault, and try to avoid blaming or feeling guilty. If your family member has thoughts of suicide, take him or her to the doctor or the emergency room immediately.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/588.xml>

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Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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