

Depression in Children and Teens

What is depression?

Depression is an illness that can make your child feel sad or hopeless. Children with depression may seem less confident or lose interest in things they used to enjoy. They may have trouble focusing or seem grouchy, angry, or worried. They may not want to go to school. Their eating or sleeping habits may change. Some children with depression have aches and pains.

What causes depression?

Depression is caused by an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. It can be triggered by stressful events, like losing a loved one, the breakup of a relationship, moving to a new school, bullying, abuse, or an illness. Depression can run in families.

Depression is a serious illness. It is not your child's fault if he or she is depressed.

How is depression treated?

Depression can be treated with counseling, medicines called antidepressants, or both. If you are worried that your child may have depression, the first step is to take your child to the doctor.

Talk therapy is often used to treat depression. It is a type of counseling that focuses on conversations between the patient and the doctor.

Antidepressants work by balancing the normal chemicals in the brain. They are not addictive or habit-forming.

Antidepressants have not been shown to increase the risk of suicide. However, a few children and young adults will think about suicide more often than others and may hurt themselves. It is always important to be on the lookout for any suicidal thoughts or behaviors in depressed children.

I'm afraid that my child is going to hurt him- or herself or someone else. What should I do?

Take your child to the emergency room at your local hospital right away for an immediate assessment and possible treatment.

What happens after depression is diagnosed?

Many doctors will start with talk therapy if the child's depression is not severe. One good thing about talk therapy is that your child will learn life skills to help deal with stressful times in life.

Your doctor may suggest that your child take an antidepressant. This will likely make your child feel better faster than talk therapy. Your child may benefit from taking an antidepressant and receiving talk therapy at the same time.

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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 <https://familydoctor.org>.

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Your child's doctor can help you decide which treatment option is best for your child. The treatment plan can be changed at any time based on your child's progress.

When will my child get better?

Each child and situation is different. Many children feel better three or four weeks after starting an antidepressant, with even more improvement after six to eight weeks. Talk therapy usually makes children feel better within three to six months.

How long will my child need treatment?

To prevent the depression from coming back, many doctors recommend continuing antidepressants for one year after depression symptoms go away.

Initial talk therapy is usually completed within six

months. After that, your child may return to therapy when needed.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Information Resource

<https://familydoctor.org/depression-in-children-and-teens>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html>

National Institute of Mental Health

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression/index.shtml>

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