

## Screening, Diagnosing, and Treating Depression



Depression is a common mental health condition that can affect anyone, causing persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest in activities, as well as physical symptoms such as changes in appetite, sleep, and fatigue.<sup>1</sup> If you or a loved one experiences these symptoms, it's important to seek medical help, as depression can also cause thoughts of self-harm.<sup>2</sup> However, with the proper treatment and support, depression can be managed effectively.<sup>1</sup> In this guide, we will discuss the screening, diagnosis, and treatment options for depression.

### SCREENING

To identify depression, screening is crucial and involves a series of questions. The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) is the most common tool used for screening.<sup>3</sup> The PHQ-9 is a self-administered questionnaire consisting of nine questions about the frequency and severity of symptoms such as feeling down or hopeless, little interest in activities, tiredness, trouble sleeping, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide over the past two weeks.<sup>3,4</sup> Each question has a score ranging from zero to three, for a maximum total score of 27. Total scores of 5, 10, 15, and 20 indicate mild, moderate, moderately severe, and

severe depression, respectively.<sup>3,4</sup> Screening is usually done in a primary care setting, but can also be performed by mental health professionals.<sup>3</sup> The PHQ-9 can help with diagnosis and tracking symptom improvement during treatment.<sup>4</sup>



### DIAGNOSING

To be diagnosed with major depression, a person must have experienced five or more depressive symptoms daily, for most of the day, for at least two weeks. In addition, one of the symptoms must be either a depressed mood or a loss of interest in enjoyable activities. These symptoms include<sup>2</sup>:

- Loss of interest or pleasure in all activities
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Sleep disturbances
- Feelings of agitation or sluggishness
- Fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts

A health care professional may diagnose a person with depression based on a physical exam, lab tests, psychiatric evaluation, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5).<sup>5</sup>

#### PHYSICAL EXAM:

A doctor or mental health professional may perform a physical exam and ask about your health. In some instances, depression may be linked to an underlying physical health condition.



**LAB TESTS:** Your doctor, for example, may order tests such as a complete blood count (CBC) or thyroid tests to ensure they function appropriately.

**PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATION:** A mental health professional may ask you to fill out a screening questionnaire, such as the PHQ-9, to assess the symptoms and severity of depression.

**DSM-5:** A mental health professional may use the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) criteria for major depression listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) as a basic diagnosis.

## TREATMENT



Depression is a treatable condition that often responds well to treatment, with nearly 80% to 90% of people with depression seeing improvements in their symptoms.<sup>6</sup>

There are several treatment options for depression, including medication, psychotherapy, a

combination of both, and other treatment options, such as brain stimulation therapy and lifestyle modifications or social support.<sup>5</sup>

**PSYCHOTHERAPY**, also known as talk therapy, involves talking with a mental health professional about your depression. Different types of psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or interpersonal therapy (IT), can effectively treat depression.<sup>5</sup>

### Psychotherapy can help you<sup>5</sup>:

- Adjust to a crisis or help in addressing a difficult situation.
- Identify negative beliefs and replace them with healthy, positive ones.
- Find better ways to cope and solve problems.
- Explore and develop positive interactions in your relationships.
- Identify triggers and behaviors that worsen depressive symptoms.
- Regain a sense of control and well-being.
- Learn to set realistic goals for your life.



## MEDICATION



Medications known as antidepressants can help change the brain chemistry that causes depression. There are several different types of antidepressants available, including the ones listed below. Antidepressants take time to work, usually around 4-8 weeks, before patients

can see improvements in symptoms such as sleep, appetite, concentration, and mood.<sup>7</sup> Discussing the right medication for you with your doctor is important, as there are potentially significant side effects associated with these medications.<sup>5</sup>

## SELECTIVE SEROTONIN REUPTAKE INHIBITORS (SSRIS)

Doctors often start by prescribing an SSRI, a newer antidepressant class. These drugs are considered safer and cause fewer bothersome side effects than other types of antidepressants. Examples of SSRIs include citalopram (Celexa), escitalopram (Lexapro), fluoxetine (Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil, Pexeva), sertraline (Zoloft) and vilazodone (Viibryd).<sup>5</sup>

## SEROTONIN-NOREPINEPHRINE REUPTAKE INHIBITORS (SNRIS)

Examples of SNRIs include duloxetine (Cymbalta), venlafaxine (Effexor XR), desvenlafaxine (Pristiq, Khedezla), and levomilnacipran (Fetzima).<sup>5</sup>

## ATYPICAL ANTIDEPRESSANTS

These medications do not fit into any of the other antidepressant classes and are hence labeled as such. They include bupropion (Wellbutrin XL, Wellbutrin SR, Aplenzin, Forfivo XL), mirtazapine (Remeron), nefazodone, trazodone and vortioxetine (Trintellix).<sup>5</sup>

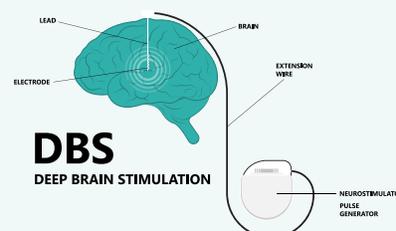
## TRICYCLIC ANTIDEPRESSANTS (TCAS)

TCAs can be very effective; however, they tend to cause more worrisome side effects than the newer class of antidepressants. Examples include imipramine (Tofranil), nortriptyline (Pamelor), amitriptyline, doxepin, trimipramine (Surmontil), desipramine (Norpramin) and protriptyline (Vivactil).<sup>5</sup>

## MONOAMINE OXIDASE INHIBITORS (MAOIS)

MAOIs are typically prescribed when more desirable antidepressant medications with favorable side effect profiles, such as SSRIs and SNRIs, have failed to improve patient symptoms. Using this class of medications may require a strict diet because of certain dangerous interactions with foods such as cheeses, pickles, wines, and certain medications or herbal supplements. Examples of this class include tranylcypromine (Parnate), phenelzine (Nardil), and isocarboxazid (Marplan). Newer MAOIs like selegiline (Emsam), which comes in a patch, may cause fewer side effects than other MAOIs. However, these medications cannot be combined with SSRIs.<sup>5</sup>

## BRAIN STIMULATION THERAPY



For people with severe depression, or depression that is not relieved with medications, brain stimulation therapy may offer a feasible option. Brain stimulation therapy involves the

# QUICK GUIDE FOR PROVIDERS

## TREATMENT (CONT.)

use of electrical currents, which are passed through the brain to alter the function and effect of chemicals in the brain to relieve the symptoms of depression. Examples of brain stimulation therapies include electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), and vagus nerve stimulation (VNS).<sup>5</sup>

### LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Depression isn't a condition that you can treat on your own. In addition to seeking professional help, incorporating these self-care strategies into your daily routine can be helpful if you<sup>5</sup>:

- Stick to your treatment plan.
  - Continue to keep all psychotherapy appointments, and do not skip taking your medications.
- Learn more about depression.
  - Educate yourself about depression to help better understand your condition.
- Pay attention to warning signs.
  - Learn to identify what triggers your depressive symptoms and how to manage them effectively.
- Avoid alcohol and recreational drugs.



- Avoid all forms of alcohol and illicit drug use.
- Take care of yourself.
  - Eat healthy, stay physically active, and get enough sleep.
- Seek help from local support groups.
  - Seek help from local groups such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), which offer education, support groups, counseling, and other resources to help you or your loved one with depression.

### CONCLUSION

Depression can affect anyone. Early screening for depression, prompt diagnosis, and effective treatment plans are crucial for managing this common mental health condition and improving individuals' quality of life, so don't hesitate. Reach out to a health care professional if you or a loved one is experiencing symptoms of depression.

### NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

**1(800) 273-TALK - (800) 273-8255**  
[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

This resource is intended for educational purposes only and is intended for US health care professionals who may choose to share this handout with patients or their caregivers.

This handout does not replace proper medical care. Please reach out to your health care provider with any questions or concerns you might have. Reach out to your family or friends for help if you have thoughts of harming yourself or others, or call the National Suicide Prevention Helpline for information at 800-273-8255.8

### References

1. Depression. Cleveland Clinic. Updated January 13, 2023. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9290-depression>.
2. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. American Psychiatric Association; 2013.
3. Kroenke K, Spitzer RL, Williams JB. The PHQ-9: validity of a brief depression severity measure. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2001;16(9):606-613. doi:10.1046/j.1525-1497.2001.016009606.x
4. University of Washington. Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9). National HIV Curriculum. Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/phq-9>
5. Mayo Clinic Staff. Depression (major depressive disorder). Mayo Clinic. Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20356013>
6. What is depression? American Psychiatric Association. Reviewed October 2020. Accessed May 8, 2023. [https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression#section\\_o](https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression#section_o)
7. Depression. National Institute of Mental Health. Reviewed April 2023. Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression>
8. Lifeline chat and text. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://988lifeline.org/chat/>