

# Depression

## Health Column

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This week (14–20 March) is Brain Awareness Week – the global campaign to increase public awareness of brain research. One very common disorder that has its origins in the brain is depression. In any one year, about one million people in Australia experience depression. Up to one in five women and one in eight men will experience depression at some time in their lives. Depression is much worse than feeling sad or ‘low’ for a while after an unhappy or stressful event. It is a serious illness that changes the way a person thinks, feels and behaves.



Depression is thought to be at least partly caused by chemical changes in the brain. A number of factors may contribute to its development. These include emotional stress (e.g. loss of a loved one, relationship problems, unemployment), hormonal changes (e.g. after childbirth, menopause), alcohol and drug abuse, certain medicines and medical conditions (e.g. cancer, diabetes, stroke, chronic pain), other mental illnesses (e.g. anxiety, dementia, schizophrenia), personal factors (e.g. loneliness), certain personality traits (e.g. negative thinking patterns, low self-esteem), and a family history of depression.

Symptoms of depression can include sadness, moodiness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, changes in weight or appetite, difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, lack of energy, difficulty thinking, concentrating and making decisions, feelings of worthlessness, headaches, body aches and pains, and thoughts of suicide. If you have had any of these symptoms for more than 2 weeks, talk to your doctor. If you are a parent, look out for these symptoms in your teenagers.

Depression is often not recognised and can go on for months or even years if not treated. Untreated depression can have many negative effects on a person's life, including serious relationship problems, difficulty finding and keeping a job, and drug and alcohol problems. Depression is one of the most treatable of mental disorders. Most people with depression eventually respond well to treatment. It is important to seek support as early as possible – the sooner a person gets treatment, the sooner they can recover.

There are several different types of treatment for depression. Often, more than one form of treatment is needed. The most commonly used treatments are psychotherapy (such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy) and antidepressant medicines, or a combination of the two. Psychotherapy can help you change unhelpful patterns of thinking and acting.

Antidepressant medicines can correct chemical changes in the brain. There are many different types of antidepressants, and you may need to try several before finding one that suits you.

There are also a number of things you can do yourself to help reduce the symptoms of depression. Regular exercise can create positive feeling and improve mood. Getting enough sleep on a regular basis, eating a healthy diet and avoiding alcohol can also be helpful. Learning and using relaxation techniques can help relax your body and mind. Let family and friends know how you are feeling. Although they may not fully understand what you're going through, they may be able to give you extra support. Always check with a doctor or pharmacist before using complementary medicines or alternative therapies to treat depression.

There are many organisations that provide help and support for people with depression, and for their families and friends. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

For more information, you can get a Self Care Fact Card on *Depression* from pharmacies that provide the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's (PSA) Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.