

# Depression

Depression is a common and serious form of childhood mental disorder. It is more severe than normal sadness. It can interfere with a child's energy, concentration, sleep, and appetite. It can go on for weeks, months, or even longer. Depression is not a character weakness. And it is not just a passing phase. It is a real illness that can be diagnosed and treated effectively. Up to 3% of children and up to 8% of adolescents suffer from depression. Fewer than half of those afflicted receive the treatment they need.

*Clinical depression in children includes several disorders:*

- **Major depressive disorder**, where children have feelings of overwhelming sadness or irritability, worthlessness, and guilt. They lose interest in activities that once gave them pleasure. They are frequently bored. They may complain of physical problems, such as stomachaches or headaches.
- **Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder**, where children are mostly irritable for a long time. Often their behavior is out of control. They may also have other disorders, such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or an anxiety disorder.
- **Persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia)**, which resembles major depressive disorder, but the symptoms are not usually as intense. However, they may last a year or longer.

## Causes

Doctors do not know exactly what causes depression. Physical disorders, life experiences, and heredity can contribute. There is evidence that children whose caregivers have depression are at a greater risk of being depressed. A child's risk for becoming depressed may increase with stress or having gone through an experience of devastating loss or trauma. Behavioral problems and other mental disorders – for example, conduct, attention-deficit, learning, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders — frequently occur with depression and may help explain its onset. A family history of bipolar disorder is another significant risk factor.



## Symptoms

The symptoms of depression in children can be subtle at first. They may occur suddenly. Or they may happen slowly over time. It can be hard to recognize a child might have depression.

- Sadness
- A marked change in appetite
- Decline in school performance
- Irritability
- Feeling slowed down or "burned out"
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Fatigue
- Loss of interest in activities, friends, or family
- Inappropriate sexual activity
- Indecisiveness
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Physical complaints (headaches)
- Inability to concentrate
- Excessive feelings of guilt and low self-esteem
- Recurring thoughts of death and suicide

## Diagnosis

- A complete history of symptoms to determine how long and how often they have been present
- Questions about any thoughts of death or suicide
- Inquiries about any family history of depression and other mental illnesses
- Inquiries about whether family or social stresses may have precipitated the depression
- Tests to determine whether a physical disorder is the cause

## Treatment

Treatment for depression usually centers around professional counseling and medication. It also may include education about depression for the child and family. For adolescents, a combination of psychotherapy and antidepressants is usually most effective. For younger children, psychotherapy alone is usually tried first.