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Depression in children and teenagers: what is it?

Depression is an illness that affects people of all ages, including children and teenagers. It can make it difficult for young people to enjoy everyday activities, keep up with school, or connect with family and friends. But there are treatments that can help.

This information explains what depression is, what the symptoms are, and how it is diagnosed in children aged 6 to 18.

What is depression?

Depression is a mental health condition that can cause someone to feel sad or empty, and lose interest in things they usually enjoy. It can affect children and teenagers, not just adults.

Adolescence is a time of many changes, and it's normal for young people to go through difficult times or experience mood swings. They might have trouble with school, friends, or other challenges. Usually, these ups and downs pass with time.

However, depression is different. It's a serious illness that doesn't go away on its own. Without treatment, it can get worse. Unlike temporary struggles, depression can last for weeks, months, or even longer. This can have a big impact on a child's ability to enjoy life and manage daily activities.

No one knows for sure what causes some children and teenagers to get depression. It's more common among girls, and among LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) youth. Young people with another mental health condition or a long-term illness are more at risk of depression.

Depression may also run in some families. It can also be triggered by big life events, stress, or trauma.

What are the symptoms of depression in children and teenagers?

The symptoms of depression in young people are not always the same as those in adults.

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These are the symptoms you might notice if your child or teenager is depressed:

- Being sad or irritable most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest in the activities they used to enjoy
- Losing weight without dieting, or being less interested in eating
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Having no energy
- Seeming unusually restless or sluggish
- Feeling worthless or overly guilty for no reason
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Thinking or talking a lot about death.

While one of the main symptoms of depression is sadness, this can look different in young people. Instead of seeming sad, they might seem more angry, moody, or anxious than usual.

Younger children may have physical symptoms with no obvious cause, like headaches or stomach aches.

Young people with depression may use alcohol or drugs to try to feel better or cope with their feelings. Some might self-harm or have suicidal thoughts.

Children or teenagers who are at risk of harming themselves need immediate help and protection. They will probably need to be admitted to hospital or to another kind of healthcare facility straight away.

There are no specific tests that doctors can do to tell if your child has depression. Doctors diagnose depression in young people based on their symptoms. If your child has at least three symptoms from the list above, including either sadness or loss of enjoyment, for more than two weeks, they could have depression. If you think this is the case with your child, talk to your doctor.

What happens next?

Depression can seriously affect a child's life. It can make it harder for them to keep up with school, maintain friendships, and enjoy everyday activities. Some young people recover from a depressive episode without treatment, but this can take a long time - sometimes up to 1 or 2 years.

That's why it's important to get help if you think your child might be depressed. The right treatment can make a big difference. Most treatments for depression in children and teenagers include talking treatments, medicines, or both.

Around half of young people improve with the first treatment they try. If the first approach doesn't work, switching to another one will usually help.

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However, depression often returns. Children who have had a depressive episode may get another one in future, either as a child or teenager, or when they are older. Research shows that:[1]

- Around 4 in 10 young people who recover from depression will have another episode within 2 years.
- Around 7 in 10 young people who recover from depression will have another episode within 5 years.
- Young people with depression spend around one third of their lives in a depressive episode.

Some young people with depression have suicidal thoughts. Any parent will find this very painful to think about. But being aware of the signs, and knowing how to get emergency medical help, can be life-saving.

If your child talks about suicide, it's a clear sign that they need help. Call your doctor straight away. You can also work with your doctor to create an emergency plan in case you become worried about your child's safety.

Where to get more help

If you're worried that your child has depression, there are charities and support groups that can help. Many people find it helpful to talk to others who have been through similar experiences.

Your child's doctor may be able to help you find one in your area, or you could search online. These groups often have useful resources and services and can connect you with other parents who understand what you're going through.

To learn more about treatment for depression in young people, see our information titled *Depression in children and teenagers: what are the treatment options?*

References

1. Walter HJ, Abright AR, Bukstein OG, et al. Clinical practice guideline for the assessment and treatment of children and adolescents with major and persistent depressive disorders. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2023 May;62(5):479-502.

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