

# Depression

Facts for Older Adults



This brochure was produced by Pfizer and RAND to improve the quality of care for older adults.

This information is intended for educational purposes to improve the general knowledge of depression. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment for specific medical conditions, is not a substitute for regular medical checkups, and does not replace individualized medical judgment of a healthcare professional. If you have a question relating to your health, you should consult your doctor or other healthcare provider. This information does not suggest or recommend the use of any Pfizer pharmaceutical product. RAND does not manufacture, distribute, or endorse specific pharmaceuticals or other medical products.

## Depression

*A common and treatable illness that is frequently unrecognized*

### What is depression?

Depression is a serious but treatable medical illness. From time to time, everyone may become sad or have the blues. However, when these feelings last 2 weeks or longer, cause difficulty in concentrating, involve loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities, or interfere with daily activities such as sleeping and eating, they may be signs of depression.

### What are risk factors for depression?

Depression is not a normal part of growing older. While the causes of depression are not clear, several factors associated with depression have been identified. If you are female, have a family history of depression, regularly take medications for sleep or nervousness, regularly drink alcohol or already have experienced an episode of depression, you have a higher chance of developing depression.

### Situations that can trigger depression include:



Serious or long-term illness  
Depression may accompany a serious or long-term illness such as stroke, cancer, diabetes, dementia, heart disease, and Parkinson's disease.

Loss of a loved one or friend  
As we grow older, death of a lifelong spouse, partner, loved one, or friend becomes a more common experience. Sadness and grief are normal responses to a loss, but if these feelings do not go away, depression may be prolonging the grief.





### How can I recognize depression?

Depression is not always easy to recognize, particularly in older adults where it may be mistaken for other

physical conditions or illnesses. Symptoms of depression include a feeling of sadness or the blues that lasts most of the day, and loss of interest in almost all daily activities. If either of these feelings continues for at least 2 weeks, and you experience four or more of the following symptoms, depression is likely.

- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Eating problems (loss of appetite, significant weight loss, or weight gain)
- Sleeping problems (difficulty falling asleep, oversleeping, waking up early)
- Being slowed down or agitated
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, or guilt
- Thoughts of suicide

Sometimes the first tip for family members is that there has been a *change* in an older person. The family may notice that the older person has *lost interest in usual activities*. Your doctor can help diagnose depression. If you recognize some of the symptoms mentioned above in yourself or in someone you love, you should seek medical attention.

### How serious is depression?

Left untreated, depression in older adults can lead to disability, worsen an existing illness, or possibly result in suicide.

Someone with suicidal thoughts may express feelings of uselessness or hopelessness, or talk about dying. Depressed older individuals may feel very alone, and not communicate how they are feeling. If you suspect that someone you know is in this situation, try to talk to that person and try to find out how he or she is feeling. Because it is very hard to know if someone is at risk for suicide, you should quickly get medical attention for someone who is depressed.

If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself, you should seek help immediately.

### Can depression be treated?

Once diagnosed, depression can be treated successfully most of the time. Treatment commonly includes medication, talk therapy, or a combination of the two. The first step toward treatment of depression is recognizing the signs and symptoms. If treatment is initiated and followed-up, success can usually be achieved.



## Facts About Depression You Can Use

### Older adults, family members, and caregivers should watch for symptoms of depression

The signs and symptoms of depression can be difficult to recognize because they are sometimes thought to be due to other illnesses, or just a sign of aging. Since the diagnosis of depression is the first step toward successful treatment, it is important that family members and caregivers be alert for the signs and symptoms of depression. This is particularly important for older adults with memory problems, for whom depression can profoundly decrease their ability to carry out usual activities. If an older person says he or she feels depressed, seek medical evaluation. If you notice an unexplained change in behavior, such



as not wanting to be involved with usual social activities, you should also seek medical evaluation. Be alert to the signs and symptoms of depression listed in this brochure.

### Medication and talk therapy treat depression

There are many medications available to treat depression effectively. Newer medications have fewer side effects than medications used in the past. Talking with a trained mental health professional also can effectively treat depression. Talk therapy often consists of 12 to 16 sessions and has an educational format. Response to treatment can take up to 6 weeks, but may occur sooner. Your doctor can help design the treatment program best for you.



**Treatment of depression requires follow-up**  
Depression treatment should be matched to the patient. What works for one patient may not work for another. Following the treatment plan enhances chances of success. Regularly scheduled follow-up appointments are important. Medication for depression may require dose adjustment or may need to be changed. Therapy with a mental health professional may be needed.

### Continuing therapy with antidepressant medication

People who respond to treatment with antidepressant medication have less of a chance that their depression will return if they complete a full course of treatment with the medication. Your doctor can tell you how long the medication should be continued to reduce the chance that depression will return.







