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Depression

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in any given one-year period, 9.5 percent of the population, or about 29.9 million American adults, suffer from depression. Unlike normal emotional experiences of sadness, loss, or passing mood states, depression is persistent and can significantly interfere with an individual's thoughts, behavior, mood, activity, and physical health. Among all medical illnesses, depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and many other developed countries.

Depression occurs twice as frequently in women as in men. Without treatment, the frequency of depressive illness as well as the severity of symptoms tends to increase over time. Left untreated, depression can lead to suicide.

Symptoms of Depression

- persistently sad, anxious, or irritable mood
- decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- difficulty thinking, concentrating, and remembering
- lack of interest in or pleasure from activities that were once enjoyed
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, and emptiness
- appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

Causes of Depression

Psychological, biological, and environmental factors may all contribute to the development of depression. Whatever the specific causes, scientific research has firmly established that depression is a biological, medical illness requiring treatment.

Norepinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine are three neurotransmitters (chemical messengers that transmit electrical signals between brain cells) thought to be involved with depression. Scientists believe that if there is a chemical imbalance in these neurotransmitters, then depression will result.

Treatment of Depression

Between 80 and 90 percent of those diagnosed with depression can be effectively treated and return to their usual daily activities and feelings. Many types of treatment are available, and the type chosen depends on the patient and the severity and pattern of his or her illness. The two most common types of treatment for depression are medication and therapy. Many patients benefit from a combination of both.

Medication: It often takes two to four weeks for an antidepressant medication to start having an effect and six to twelve weeks for it to have the full effect. Patients who take a medication are routinely evaluated by a psychiatrist to determine if the medication is working properly. If it is not, or if the medication's side effects are too great, an alternative medication may be prescribed to bring the depression under control.

Therapy: Therapy is useful in treating depression. Most patients with depression benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy which is used to help patients change the negative style of thinking and behaving often associated with depression.

Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org ~ (812) 423-4333

Mental Health America
www.nmha.org ~ (812) 426-2640

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov