

Depression in MS

In addition to the emotional responses you may have to the diagnosis and challenges of MS, a chronic and unpredictable disease, emotional changes can be caused by the MS disease process itself. Depression is one of the most common symptoms of MS and occurs more commonly in people with MS than in the general population or in those with many other chronic illnesses. People living with MS are at greatest risk for depression at times of major transition such as diagnosis, during a relapse, or when a major change in function or abilities occur.

Depression can range from mild to severe. Episodes of depression can be brief, lasting only a few days or weeks, or they can be long-lasting without improvement. The severe form of depression is referred to as 'clinical depression', 'major depression', or 'major depressive disorder'. Major depression in MS impacts everyday functioning, self-care, adherence to treatment, and quality of life. It can also be life-threatening. **It is important to report any changes in mood to a healthcare provider.**

Answering 'yes' to either of the questions below *may* signify you have depression.

Over the past two weeks,

- have you felt down, depressed, or hopeless?
- have you felt little interest or pleasure in doing things?

What is depression?

Depression might manifest as a period of sadness and/or loss of pleasure in previously enjoyed activities. Symptoms may include:

- Sadness or irritability.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in everyday activities.
- Changes in appetite.
- Sleep disturbances (either insomnia or excessive sleeping).
- Agitation or slowing in behavior.
- Fatigue and lack of energy.
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt.
- Problems with thinking or concentration.
- Persistent thoughts of death or suicide.

You should talk to your healthcare provider if you have periods of distressing emotional experiences that:

- Stick around for weeks or months.
- Interfere with your everyday life, activities, or relationships.
- Get in the way of taking care of your health.
- Feel out of your control.

Treatment

Severe depression requires careful diagnosis and effective treatment.

- The best treatment for severe depression is a combination of psychotherapy and antidepressant medication. Exercise has also been shown to improve mood.
- Several antidepressant medications treat both depression and anxiety, which commonly occur together in people living with MS.
- Antidepressants generally take up to four to six weeks to work and it may take time to find the right medication, dose, or combination of medications to achieve relief with the fewest side effects. A follow-up evaluation by the prescribing healthcare provider approximately four weeks after starting treatment is essential. Together, you and your healthcare provider can determine whether the medication is providing adequate benefit with manageable side effects.
- It is important for the healthcare provider who is prescribing antidepressant medication to know all the other medications you are taking.

Supportive activities

While supportive family and friends may help shake off mild depression, psychotherapy and/or antidepressant medication are generally needed to treat the condition and prevent an even deeper depression that is harder to treat. Support groups may offer some help with milder types of depression. However, they are not effective in treating severe clinical depression. Major depression requires treatment with medication and/or psychotherapy to fully resolve.

Lifestyle behaviors that can complement depression treatment include:

- Meditation and mindfulness activities.
- Deep breathing techniques.
- Physical activity.
- Healthy eating patterns.
- Good sleep hygiene promoting high quality of sleep.

If, however, the depressive feelings persist and continue to interfere with daily activities and quality of life, consultation with a mental health professional is essential. ***If you are having thoughts about harming yourself or feel you are at risk of hurting yourself or someone else, call, text, or chat 988 to connect to the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.*

This information is made possible through a collaboration between the VA MS Centers of Excellence (www.va.gov/ms) and the National MS Society (www.nationalmssociety.org).