

Depression

Introduction:

Depression is a state of mental illness. It is characterised by deep, long-lasting feelings of sadness or despair. Depression can change an individual's thinking/feelings and also affects his/her social behaviour and sense of physical well-being. It can affect people of any age group, including young children and teens. It can run in families and usually starts between the ages of 15 and 30 years.

Women and elderly people are more commonly affected than men.

There are several types of depression such as major depression it is a change in mood that lasts for weeks or months. It is one of the most severe types of depression.

Dysthymia (chronic depression) is a less severe form of depression but usually lasts for several years.

Psychotic depression a severe form of depression associated with hallucinations and delusions (feelings that are untrue or unsupported).

Seasonal depression, occurring only at certain time of the year usually winter, also known as 'winter blues'.

Causes:

Depression is thought to be caused by an imbalance of certain brain chemicals called 'neurotransmitters' that carries signals in brain which the body uses to control mood. Some of the common factors that may cause depression are genetics (hereditary), trauma and high levels of stress, mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and substance abuse, postpartum depression (women may develop depression after the birth of the baby), serious medical conditions such as heart disease, cancer and HIV, use of certain medications, alcohol and drug abuse, individuals with low self-esteem, trauma and high levels of stress due to financial problems, breakup of a relationship or loss of a loved one.

Signs and Symptoms:

The signs and symptoms of depression include feeling of sadness and loneliness, loss of interest in activities once found enjoyable, feeling of hopelessness, worthlessness or excessive guilt, fatigue or loss of energy, sleeping too little or too much, loss of appetite, restlessness and being easily annoyed.

Diagnosis:

The doctor may diagnose depression based on the detailed history and sign and symptoms of the individual. Many a times the individual is asked a series of questions to help screen/check for depression symptoms. Specific examinations include physical examination of the individual such as height and weight measurement. Examination of the vital signs such as blood pressure, heart rate and temperature. Laboratory tests such as blood tests to screen for alcohol/drugs in blood. Psychological evaluation of the individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviour patterns.

Treatment:

The most common treatments of depression are -

- a) Counselling & Psychotherapy.
- b) Medication.
- c) Electroconvulsive therapy.

Counselling allows individuals to understand and accept the initial cause of depression. It can help address low self-esteem or relationship issues or persistent negative thinking.

Psychotherapy - For mild to moderate depression, psychotherapy may be the best treatment option. There are two main types of psychotherapy commonly used to treat depression. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) helps change

negative ways of thinking and behaving. Interpersonal therapy (IPT) helps people understand and work through troubled personal relationships that may cause depression. Medications such as anti-depressants are given to help balance chemicals in the brain known as 'neurotransmitters'.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is carried out in case the treatment with other therapies such as medications has failed. ECT is a procedure during which controlled amount of electricity is introduced into the brain in conjunction with anaesthesia and muscle relaxant medications. It helps restore the balance of neurotransmitters by causing the brain to produce a mild generalized seizure (lasting for about 30 seconds).

Complication:

If left untreated, depression can lead to some severe complications such as emotional, behavioural, health and even legal/financial problems, relationship difficulties, social isolation and even suicide.

Prevention:

Preventive measures include regular exercise, healthy diet and stable relationships. They are helpful in keeping stress low and thereby reduce the chances of feeling depressed again. The outcome of depression is usually favourable. With prompt treatment, a depressed person can return to a happier lifestyle and more balanced outlook on life.

More Information:

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