

# Late Life Depression

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## A Treatable Illness

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Depression is a serious but treatable medical condition that involves the body, mood and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself and the way one thinks about things. Depression can occur at any age. In late life, physical and social changes can increase the likelihood of a depressive illness.

## Symptoms

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Depression can be mild, moderate or severe. People may develop a few, or many, of its symptoms. The symptoms of depression include the following:

- Trouble sleeping, early-morning awakening or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being slowed down
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering and making decisions
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain, which do not respond to routine treatment
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Depression is not the same as a passing blue mood. Symptoms can persist for weeks, months, or even years. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with a depressive illness cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better.

## Causes

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Depression is caused by a combination of biological, genetic and environmental factors. Commonly, depression coexists with other medical illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer and Parkinson’s disease. Having a chronic medical illness increases the risks of depression. At other times, painful losses contribute to its development. Losing one’s spouse, job, family home or mobility are just a few of the losses that can trigger depression. Appropriate treatment, however, can help.

## Treatments

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Up to 80 percent of older adults with a depressive disorder can improve when they receive appropriate treatment. The first step is a physical examination by a physician to rule out other causes for a person’s symptoms. Next, the physician should conduct a diagnostic evaluation for depression or refer the person to a mental health professional for this evaluation. Treatment usually involves medication or counseling. Sometimes a combination of medication and counseling provide the greatest relief. It usually takes a number of weeks for the full effects of treatment to be felt. Once the person is feeling better, treatment may need to be continued for several months or, in some cases, indefinitely to prevent relapse.