

Childhood Depression: Care Instructions

Overview

Depression is a mental health condition that causes a child or teen to feel sad or irritable for a long period of time. A young person who is depressed may not enjoy school, play, or friends. They may also sleep more or less than usual, lose or gain weight, and be withdrawn.

The cause of depression is not well understood. There are many factors that may be involved. Depression may run in families. Events that cause great stress, such as moving or the loss of a loved one, may also lead to it.

Depression can last for a long time. It may come in cycles of feeling down and feeling normal. It's important to know that all forms of depression can be treated.

Follow-up care is a key part of your child's treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if your child is having problems. It's also a good idea to know your child's test results and keep a list of the medicines your child takes.

How can you care for your child at home?

- Offer your child support and understanding. This is one of the most important things you can do to help your child cope with being depressed.
- Be safe with medicines. Have your child take medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if your child has any problems with a medicine. It is important for your child to keep taking medicine for depression even after symptoms go away, so that it does not come back. Your child may need to try several medicines before finding the one that works best. Many side effects of the medicines go away after a while. Talk to your doctor about any side effects or other concerns.
- Make sure your child gets enough sleep. There are things you can do if your child has problems sleeping. For example, have your child go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every morning. Keep the bedroom dark and free of noise.
- Make sure your child gets regular exercise, such as swimming, walking, or playing vigorously every day.
- Avoid over-the-counter medicines, herbal therapies, and any medicines that have not been prescribed by your doctor. They may interfere with the medicine used to treat depression.
- Give your child healthy foods. If your child doesn't want to eat, try offering small, frequent snacks rather than 1 or 2 large meals each day.
- Encourage your child to be hopeful about feeling better. Positive thinking is very important in treating depression. It's hard to be hopeful when you feel depressed, but remind your child that recovery happens over time.
- Find a counselor your child likes and trusts. Encourage your child to talk openly and honestly about any problems.
- Work with your child's doctor to create a safety plan. A plan covers warning signs of self-harm, coping strategies, and trusted family, friends, and professionals your teen can reach out to if they have thoughts about hurting themselves.

Where to get help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

If your child talks about suicide, self-harm, a mental health crisis, a substance use crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress, get help right away. You can:

- Call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at **988**.

- Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).
- Text HOME to 741741 to access the Crisis Text Line.

Consider saving these numbers in your phone.

Go to [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) for more information or to chat online.

When should you call for help?

Call anytime you think your child may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- Your child makes threats or attempts to hurt themselves or another person.
- You are a young person and you feel you cannot stop from hurting yourself or someone else.

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- Call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988.
- Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).
- Text HOME to 741741 to access the Crisis Text Line.

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Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- Your child hears voices.
- Your child has depression and:
 - Talks or writes about death, including writing suicide notes and talking about guns, knives, or pills. Be sure all guns, knives, and pills are safely put away where your child cannot get to them.
 - Starts to give away possessions.
 - Uses drugs or drinks alcohol heavily.
 - Starts to spend a lot of time alone.
 - Acts very aggressively or suddenly appears calm.

Watch closely for changes in your child's health, and be sure to contact your doctor if your child has any problems.

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