

Recognizing and Handling Depression for People with Diabetes

Toolkit No. 15

What does depression have to do with diabetes?

Serious depression is common in people with diabetes. In fact, diabetes doubles the risk for depression. As many as one of every three people with diabetes experiences symptoms of depression. It's especially common in women. Men experience it too but may be less likely to seek treatment. **The good news is that treatment can help.**

What are the symptoms of depression?

Depression is a medical condition that's more than just feeling sad, stressed, or irritable once in a while. Most people with depression will have several of the following symptoms for most of the day, almost every day, for at least 2 weeks:

- feeling down and depressed
- losing interest in their usual activities
- feeling that things that used to make them happy no longer bring pleasure
- experiencing weight loss or gain
- having trouble sleeping (insomnia) or sleeping too much
- feeling agitated and nervous or feeling sluggish, like they're moving slowly
- having crying spells or being very emotional
- feeling very tired and having no energy
- having trouble focusing or making decisions
- thinking about death or suicide

Symptoms like these are normal after major losses, such as the death of a loved one, diagnosis of a new medical problem, or losing a job, but people should start feeling better after a few weeks. People with depression can't trace their symptoms directly to medications, medical conditions, or loss of a loved one.



When you have depression, talking with a friend or family member can be a comfort.

Contrary to what many people used to believe, depression is not a sign of personal weakness or failure. Telling someone "Pull yourself out of it!" can't cure depression.

What causes depression?

Researchers believe that depression is caused by a combination of physical, psychological, and genetic factors. Differences in how the brain works, how a person reacts to stressful events such as chronic illness or divorce, and a history of depression in the family can all make someone more likely to get depression.

It isn't clear whether diabetes causes depression or exactly how depression is related to diabetes. But we do know that diabetes can cause people to feel overwhelmed by the demands of day-to-day care. It's common for people with diabetes to worry about possible long-term complications, the cost of diabetes care, and the effects of diabetes on family and work life. As with any chronic illness, people wonder, "Why did I have to be the one to get diabetes?"

How does depression affect diabetes?

Depression can make it hard for you to focus on taking care of yourself. You might feel that it's too much trouble to check your blood glucose (sugar) or try to choose healthy foods. Things can seem hopeless. When you don't take care of yourself, blood glucose levels can rise. Frequent high blood glucose levels over time raise your risk for diabetes-related complications. Studies have shown that depression can even make aches and pains seem worse.

What should I do if I think I have depression?

If you have symptoms of depression, it's important to get help as soon as you can. The sooner you get treatment, the sooner you'll feel better. Make an appointment to see your health care provider. Explain how you've been feeling and ask whether you might have serious depression. After asking about your symptoms and doing other checks as needed, your health care provider will discuss treatment options with you, such as starting treatment right away or seeing a specialist.

What is the treatment for depression?

Depression is treated with medication and counseling (also called psychotherapy). Some people use both treatments; others find that either medication or counseling alone helps them. Your health care provider can explain both kinds of treatments to help you choose what to do.

Antidepressant medications help change the way your brain works. There are several different types of medications. Your health care provider can prescribe the best type of medication for you. You'll want to keep in mind that some antidepressants take several weeks to improve your mood. But eventually medication can help you feel back to normal and can restore your sense of well-being.

Counseling can teach you the skills you need to cope with the stresses in your life. Sometimes it helps to talk about problems with someone who is objective. A counselor can offer a fresh perspective on what's going on in your life.

Other ways to cope with depression

Many people find that having the support of family and friends can be a comfort. Find someone to talk with about what's going on. Or if it's hard for you to talk about your feelings, sometimes just spending time with family and friends can help you feel better.

Physical activity can also help you feel better both when you're depressed and once you're feeling better. Take a walk every day, play with the kids, or find another activity you enjoy, like dancing, walking, or swimming. Activity can lift your spirits and provide other health benefits as well.

Remember your risk for depression

Depression can come and go throughout life, especially if you have diabetes and are at high risk for depression. Knowing the symptoms and taking action to get help when depression occurs will help you return to "your old self" as soon as possible.

