

Depression in Children and Teens

Over 322 million people live with depression worldwide, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Approximately 3.2 million of adolescents 12 to 17 living in the US had at least one major depressive episode in 2017 (National Institute of Mental Health). An estimated 60.1% of adolescents did not receive treatment for depression.

Depression is a mood disorder that causes feelings of sadness over an extended period of time. Depression is also referred to as major depressive disorder or clinical depression. It is normal to feel sad due to an event or some kind of life change, but depression can cause overwhelming sadness for several weeks or even months. These depressive episodes can happen once or several times throughout one's lifetime. Depression can affect how a person feels and behaves and can even cause physical symptoms. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), clinical depression is when a person experiences a depressed mood and/or loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed, plus five of the symptoms below for at least two weeks:

- Depressed mood for the majority of the day
- Feeling of worthlessness or guilt
- Slowed thoughts and movements
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in eating habits – either loss of appetite or overeating
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Thoughts of suicide

Other symptoms of depression may include:

- Drop in grades
- Feelings of hopelessness or negativity
- Irritable
- Withdrawn
- Sleep disturbances – insomnia or sleeping too much
- Body pains, like headaches or stomachaches

Depression may occur at any age, but the onset usually occurs in the teens, 20s or early 30s. The fluctuating hormones and changes in mood can make it difficult to identify signs of depression in children and teens with depression. A child or teen with depression tends to be more irritable than adults with depression. Children also tend to have more physical complaints, like stomachaches and headaches, than adults. Teens may have changes in academic performance. Teens are also at-risk of self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs to reduce symptoms.

Depression does not always have a cause; it can develop out of nowhere. Children and teens with a family history of depression are at a higher risk of developing depression. Bullying, stress and loss can cause depression. Significant social media usage has also been linked to depression. Children and teens who have anxiety, conduct disorders or learning difficulties are more likely to be diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives.

If left untreated, depression can worsen. If your child or teen begins to express thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or your medical provider right



away. If you suspect your child has clinical depression, ask them about their feelings or request a screening from a pediatrician. It is important to work with a medical provider to rule out any other medical conditions first. Once a diagnosis has been determined, there are many treatment options for depression that have been found to be effective. Treatment for depression may include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, medication or a combination of the two. Talk therapy or play therapy may also be used to treat depression depending on the age of the child. Regular exercise, healthy eating and sleeping habits can also help manage depression.

References:

- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>
- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>
- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/teen-depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20350985>
- <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/childhood-depression>
- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression/index.shtml>