

Patient information from BMJ

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Depression in children and teenagers: what is it?

Depression is an illness that affects people of all ages, including children and teenagers. It can stop a child or teenager getting the most out of life. But there are treatments that can help young people get better.

Here, we discuss the signs and symptoms of depression in children and teenagers and how it's diagnosed. To learn more about treatments, see *Depression in children and teenagers: what treatments work?*

What happens when children get depressed?

Adults aren't the only ones who get depressed. But depressed young people often hide their feelings. As a parent, you may find it hard to tell if your child is depressed or just going through a phase.

Depression is an illness. It can get worse if it isn't treated. But depressed children can be helped with the right treatment. This information is about depression in children and teenagers aged 6 to 18.

No one knows for sure what causes some children and teenagers to get depression. In teenagers it's more common among girls. Depression may also run in some families.

Depression in young people is often triggered by events: for example, the death of a parent, a long-term illness, the breakup of a friendship, or worries about school work.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of depression in children and young people are not always the same as those in adults.

These are the symptoms you might notice if your child or teen is depressed:

- Being sad or irritable most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest in the activities they used to enjoy

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- Losing weight without dieting, or being less interested in eating
- Sleeping too much or too little, and having no energy
- Seeming unusually restless or sluggish
- Blaming themselves for things that go wrong: feeling worthless or guilty for no reason
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions; your child's schoolwork might suffer
- Thinking or talking a lot about death.

Younger children may have physical symptoms with no obvious cause, like headaches, stomach aches, or pains in the arms or legs.

Young people with depression might harm themselves. Some might cut themselves or think about suicide. They may also drink alcohol or use drugs.

Children or teenagers who are at risk of harming themselves need immediate help and protection. They will probably need to be admitted to hospital or to another kind of healthcare facility straight away.

Young people don't need to have all of these symptoms to be depressed. But if your child has the first two symptoms and at least two others for at least two weeks, they could have depression. If you think this is the case with your child, talk to your doctor.

What will happen to my child?

Depression can badly affect your child's development, both in their social life and in their school life. A bout of depression in a young person lasts, on average, seven months.

Some children recover from depression without treatment, but at least half of children who don't have treatment will still be depressed after a year. That's why it's important to get help. The right treatment can help a child or young person recover from depression more quickly.

Children who have had a bout of depression may get another one in future, either as a child or teenager, or when they are older. Knowing which treatments help can be very useful in helping manage these relapses.

Some teenagers and children with depression try to kill themselves. Any parent will find this very painful to consider. But being alert, and knowing how to get emergency medical help for your child, can help prevent this happening.

Some children and teenagers need to be hospitalised for a while if they are a danger to themselves or others. But this is rare.

If children say they are thinking about suicide it's a clear sign that they need help. You need to take this very seriously. Call your doctor straight away. You can also make an emergency plan with your doctor, to use if you become worried that your child is suicidal.

Where to get more help

Depending where you live, there may be charities and other groups that help young people with depression.

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For example, Young Minds is a UK charity for children and young people with mental health problems, and their parents (youngminds.org.uk). Your doctor might be able to help you find support in your area, or you can search online.

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