Everyone occasionally feels sad or blue, but these feelings are usually short lived and pass within a couple of days. When you have depression, it interferes with daily life and causes pain for both you and those who care about you. Depression is a common but serious illness.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

People with depressive illnesses do not all experience the same symptoms. The severity, frequency, and duration of symptoms vary depending on the individual and his or her particular illness.

Signs and Symptoms

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Irritability or restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
- Insomnia, early morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts
- Aches, pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment

What illnesses often coexist with depression?

Other illnesses may come on before depression, cause it, or be a consequence of it, but depression and other illnesses interact differently in different people. In any case, co-occurring illnesses need to be diagnosed and treated.

Anxiety disorders, such as *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, social phobia, and generalized anxiety disorder, often accompany depression. PTSD can occur after a person experiences a terrifying event or ordeal, such as a violent assault, a natural disaster, an accident, terrorism, or military combat. People experiencing PTSD are especially prone to having coexisting depression.

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In a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) funded study, researchers found that more than 40% of people with PTSD also had depression 4 months after the traumatic event. Alcohol and other substance abuse or dependence may also coexist with depression. Mood disorders and substance abuse commonly occur together.

Depression also may occur with other serious medical illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), diabetes, and Parkinson's disease. People who have depression along with another medical illnesses tend to have more severe symptoms of both depression and the medical illness, more difficulty adapting to their medical condition, and more medical costs than those who do not have co-existing depression. Treating the depression can also help improve the outcome of treating the co-occurring illness.

What causes depression?

The most likely cause of depression is a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Depressive illnesses are disorders of the brain. Longstanding theories about depression suggest that important neurotransmitters (chemicals that brain cells use to communicate) are out of balance in depression.

Brain imaging technologies, such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), have shown that the brains of people who have depression look different than those of people without depression. The parts of the brain involved in mood, thinking, sleep, appetite, and behavior appear different. But these images do not reveal why the depression has occurred. They also cannot be used to diagnose depression.

Some types of depression tend to run in families. However, depression can occur in people without family histories of depression too. Scientists are studying certain genes that may make some people more prone to depression. Some genetics research indicates that risk for depression results from the influence of several genes acting together with environmental or other factors. In addition, trauma, loss of a loved one, a difficult relationship, or any stressful situation may trigger a depressive episode. Other depressive episodes may occur with or without an obvious trigger.

Depression is treatable; the first step is recognition. Your EAP is here to help you assess your needs. Call 1-800-451-1834 at any time to speak confidentially to a counselor. You can also take a depression screening at http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/mental-health-screen/patient-health

Source:
U.S. National Institute of Health, National Institutes of Mental Health. (Revised 2011). *Depression*. Retrieved August 8, 2013, from http://www.nimh.nih.gov

Employee Assistance Program

800-451-1834

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