

National Institute of Mental Health

Depression and Cancer



NIMH
National Institute
of Mental Health



Depression not only affects your brain and behavior—it affects your entire body.

Depression has been linked with other health problems, including cancer. Dealing with more than one health problem at a time can be difficult, so proper treatment is important.



What is depression?

Major depressive disorder, or depression, is a serious mental illness. Depression interferes with your daily life and routine and reduces your quality of life. About 6.7 percent of U.S. adults ages 18 and older have depression.¹

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

- Ongoing sad, anxious, or empty feelings
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once enjoyable, including sex
- Feeling tired all the time
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, or making decisions
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, a condition called insomnia, or sleeping all the time
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Thoughts of death and suicide or suicide attempts
- Ongoing aches and pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease with treatment.

For more information, see the NIMH booklet on Depression at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/index.shtml>.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease that develops when abnormal cells in your body divide and multiply without control. Normally, cells grow and divide to produce more cells only when your body needs them. But sometimes, cells keep dividing when new cells are not needed. These extra cells may form a mass called a tumor. Tumors can be either benign, which means not cancerous, or malignant, which is cancerous.

Cancer cells can develop anywhere in the body and can spread to other body parts through your blood and lymph systems. Lymph

is a clear fluid that carries blood cells that fight infection and disease throughout the body. Lymph travels through a system of vessels, much like blood vessels.

Cancer cells damage the organs and tissues they invade, causing a variety of symptoms. There are different types of cancer and symptoms can vary greatly depending on the location, or the organs and tissue that are affected.

How are depression and cancer linked?

Depression is not regularly linked with cancer, and there is no proof that one disease causes the other.^{2,3} However, when faced with a diagnosis of cancer, you may feel extreme stress, anger, sadness, or a number of other strong emotions. While these feelings usually lessen over time, they can develop into depression.

If you develop depression after learning you have cancer—or were depressed before your diagnosis—your depression may affect the course of your cancer^{2,3} as well as your ability to take part in treatment. It is important for you to treat your depression even if you are undergoing complicated cancer treatment.

How is depression treated in people who have cancer?

Depression is diagnosed and treated by a health care provider. Treating depression can help you manage your cancer treatment and improve your overall health. Recovery from depression takes time but treatments are effective.

At present, the most common treatments for depression include:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a type of psychotherapy, or talk therapy, that helps people change negative thinking styles and behaviors that may contribute to their depression
- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), a type of antidepressant medication that includes citalopram (Celexa), sertraline (Zoloft), and fluoxetine (Prozac)
- Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor (SNRI), a type of antidepressant medication similar to SSRI that includes venlafaxine (Effexor) and duloxetine (Cymbalta).

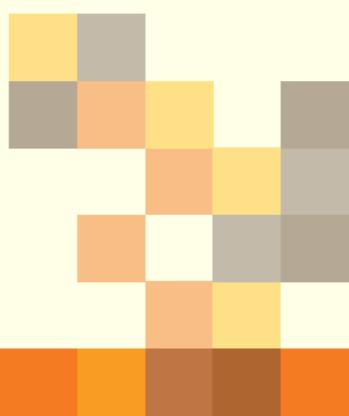
While currently available depression treatments are generally well tolerated and safe even if you're being treated for cancer, possible drug interactions and side effects require careful monitoring. Talk with your health care provider about the medications you're taking as well as other treatment options. For the latest information on medications, visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration website at <http://www.fda.gov>. Not everyone responds to treatment the same way. Medications can take several weeks to work, may need to be combined with ongoing talk therapy, or may need to be changed or adjusted to minimize side effects and achieve the best results.

Along with CBT, additional forms of talk therapy have been shown to help people with cancer manage their depression, including⁴:

- Psychoeducation, which teaches you about your illness and its treatment
- Stress management training, which teaches you different ways to cope with anxiety
- Problem-solving therapy, which can help you identify problems that interfere with your daily life and contribute to depressive symptoms and find ways to solve those problems.

You can also join a support group, which provides an important outlet for sharing the difficult emotions you're feeling. You can learn how to cope with your depression and your cancer from others who are going through similar experiences.

More information about depression treatments can be found on the NIMH website at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/how-is-depression-detected-and-treated.shtml>. If you think you are depressed or know someone who is, don't lose hope. Seek help for depression.



For More Information on Depression

Visit the National Library of Medicine's

MedlinePlus <http://medlineplus.gov>

En Español <http://medlineplus.gov/spanish>

For information on clinical trials

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/trials/index.shtml>

National Library of Medicine clinical trials database

<http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>

Information from NIMH is available in multiple formats. You can browse online, download documents in PDF, and order materials through the mail. Check the NIMH website at

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov> for the latest information on

this topic and to order publications. If you do not have

Internet access please contact the NIMH Information

Resource Center at the numbers listed below.

National Institute of Mental Health

Science Writing, Press & Dissemination Branch

6001 Executive Boulevard

Room 8184, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Phone: 301-443-4513 or

1-866-615-NIMH (6464) toll-free

TTY: 301-443-8431 or

1-866-415-8051 toll-free

FAX: 301-443-4279

E-mail: nimhinfo@nih.gov

Website: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

For More Information on Cancer

National Cancer Institute

Office of Communications and Education/

Public Inquiries Office

6116 Executive Boulevard, Suite 300

Bethesda, MD 20892-8322

Phone: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

E-mail: <http://www.cancer.gov/contact>

Website: <http://www.cancer.gov>

Citations

1. Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Merikangas KR, Walters EE. Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 2005 Jun; 62(6):617–27.
2. Williams S, Dale J. The effectiveness of treatment for depression/depressive symptoms in adults with cancer: a systematic review. *British Journal of Cancer*. 2006 Feb 13; 94(3):372–90.
3. Chida Y, Hamer M, Wardle J, Steptoe A. Do stress-related psychosocial factors contribute to cancer incidence and survival? *Nature Clinical Practice: Oncology*. 2008 Aug; 5(8):466–75.
4. Jacobsen PB, Jim HS. Psychosocial interventions for anxiety and depression in adult cancer patients: achievements and challenges. *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*. 2008 Jul–Aug; 58(4):214–30.

Reprints

This publication is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission from NIMH. We encourage you to reproduce it and use it in your efforts to improve public health. Citation of the National Institute of Mental Health as a source is appreciated. However, using government materials inappropriately can raise legal or ethical concerns, so we ask you to use these guidelines:

- NIMH does not endorse or recommend any commercial products, processes, or services, and our publications may not be used for advertising or endorsement purposes.
- NIMH does not provide specific medical advice or treatment recommendations or referrals; our materials may not be used in a manner that has the appearance of such information.
- NIMH requests that non-Federal organizations not alter our publications in ways that will jeopardize the integrity and “brand” when using the publication.
- Addition of non-Federal Government logos and website links may not have the appearance of NIMH endorsement of any specific commercial products or services or medical treatments or services.

If you have questions regarding these guidelines and use of NIMH publications, please contact the NIMH Information Resource Center at 1-866-615-6464 or e-mail at nimhinfo@nih.gov.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health
National Institute of Mental Health
NIH Publication No. 11-5002
Revised 2011