

What is depression?

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is serious mood disorder characterized by symptoms that interfere with an individual's feelings, thoughts, actions, and daily functioning. According to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting more than 300 million individuals globally.

Signs, symptoms, and complications

The severity, frequency, and duration of symptoms will vary depending on the individual. In order to be classified as MDD, some of the following symptoms must be present almost every day for a minimum of two weeks.

The signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling hopeless, guilty, worthless, or helpless
- Disturbed sleep
- Low or depressed mood
- Change in appetite and/or weight
- Suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts
- Decreased energy or fatigue (without significant exertion)
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
- Loss of pleasure in usual hobbies or activities



Causes and risk factors

Having one episode of major depression is a strong predictor of future episodes. Mood disorders and depression are not associated with a single cause but have a variety of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological risk factors, including:

- Genetic predisposition or family history of mood disorders
- Gender: more frequent among females
- Major stress, trauma, or life events
- Socio-economic factors: poverty, housing difficulties, prejudice
- Certain chronic medical conditions (e.g., dementia, Alzheimer’s disease, epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease, stroke, obesity, cancer, arthritis)
- Certain medications (e.g., PPIs, antihypertensives, analgesics)
- Being overweight or obese

Lifestyle interventions

While depression is typically addressed using a combination of medication, psychotherapy, and electroconvulsive therapy in treatment-resistant cases, certain dietary and lifestyle interventions may be beneficial.

Exercise

Regular aerobic exercise at moderate or high intensity has been shown to have antidepressant effects. Greater improvements are seen with physical activity led by trained professionals, such as personal training, trainer-led running groups, spin classes, circuit training, and aerobic classes.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness-based practices may help prevent the relapse of depressive episodes. Mindfulness interventions involve practicing awareness of the present moment. Meditation or mindfulness apps can help to introduce you to mindfulness practice, and include apps such as *Calm*, *Insight Timer*, *10% Happier*, and *Stop, Breathe & Think*.

Diet

Research has shown that an overall dietary pattern focusing on whole foods while reducing processed or fast foods may reduce the risk of depression. The table below summarizes foods to limit and favor in your diet.

Limit	Favor
High-fat dairy products (e.g., butter, heavy cream) Potatoes Processed meat (e.g., hot dogs, cured meats, canned meat, sausages) Red meat (e.g., beef, pork, veal) Refined grains (e.g., bread, pasta, crackers, baked goods, cereals) Sweets (e.g., desserts, candy, soda)	Antioxidants (e.g., dark chocolate, nuts, berries, leafy greens, herbs, spices) Extra-virgin olive oil Fish (e.g., salmon, trout, mackerel) Fruit Low-fat dairy (e.g., yogurt, kefir, milk) Vegetables Whole grains (e.g., rice, oats, buckwheat, barley)