

What is depression in children?

Childhood depression is different from the normal "blues" and everyday emotions that occur as a child develops. Just because a child seems sad doesn't necessarily mean he or she has significant depression. If the sadness becomes persistent, or if disruptive behavior that interferes with normal social activities, interests, schoolwork, or family life develops, it may indicate that he or she has a depressive illness. Keep in mind that while depression is a serious illness, it is also a treatable

Signs and symptoms of depression in children include:

- Irritability or anger
- Continuous feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Increased sensitivity to rejection
- Changes in appetite -- either increased or decreased
- Changes in sleep -- sleeplessness or excessive sleep
- Vocal outbursts or crying
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue and low energy
- Physical complaints (such as stomachaches, headaches) that don't respond to treatment
- Reduced ability to function during events and activities at home or with friends, in school, extracurricular activities, and in other hobbies or interests
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Impaired thinking or concentration
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Not all children have all of these symptoms. In fact, most will display different symptoms at different times and in different settings. Although some children may continue to function reasonably well in structured environments, most kids with significant depression will suffer a noticeable change in social activities, loss of interest in school and poor academic performance, or a change in appearance. Children may also begin using drugs or alcohol, especially if they are over age 12.

How Is Depression Diagnosed in Children?

If the symptoms of depression in your child have lasted for at least two weeks, you should schedule a visit with his or her doctor to make sure there are no physical reasons for the symptoms and to make sure that your child receives proper treatment. A consultation with a mental health care professional who specializes in children is also recommended.

A mental health evaluation should include interviews with you (the parent or primary caregiver) and your child, and any additional psychological testing that is necessary. Information from teachers, friends and classmates can be useful for showing that these symptoms are consistent during your child's various activities and are a marked change from previous behavior.

There are no specific tests -- medical or psychological -- that can clearly show depression, but tools such as questionnaires (for both the child and parents) combined with personal information can be very useful in helping diagnose depression in children. Sometimes those therapy sessions and questionnaires can uncover other concerns that contribute to the depression such as ADHD, conduct disorder, and OCD.

What Are the Treatment Options?

Treatment options for children with depression are similar to those for adults, including psychotherapy (counseling) and medication. The role that family and the child's environment play in the treatment process is different from that of adults. Your child's doctor may suggest psychotherapy first, and consider antidepressant medicine as an additional option if there is no significant improvement. The best studies to date indicate that a combination of psychotherapy and medication is most effective at treating depression.

Studies show that the antidepressant Prozac is effective in treating depression in children and teens. The drug is officially recognized by the FDA for treatment of children ages 8 to 18 with depression. Other medications may be chosen if there are other coexisting illnesses contributing to the depression.

****Information source-National Institute of Mental Health: "Depression in Children and Adolescents."