Depression

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a 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.

Common types of depression

- **Bipolar disorder**, characterized by experiencing alternating periods of extremely high moods and extremely low moods

- **Persistent depressive disorder**, characterized by a depressed mood lasting over two years

- **Postpartum depression**, characterized by experiencing major depression during pregnancy and/or the postpartum period (directly following childbirth)

- **Psychotic depression**, characterized by severe depression with some form of psychosis (e.g., delusions, hallucinations)

- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**, characterized by a cyclical onset of depression that is associated with less exposure to sunlight in the winter months

Signs, symptoms, and complications

- Change in appetite and/or weight

- Decreased energy or fatigue (without significant exertion)

- Difficulty concentrating or remembering

- Disturbed sleep

- Feeling hopeless, guilty, worthless, or helpless

- Loss of pleasure in usual hobbies or activities

- Low or depressed mood

- Suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts

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

Causes and risk factors

- Being overweight or obese
- 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)

- Family history/genetic predisposition
- Gender: females have a greater risk of depression
- Major stress, trauma, or life events
- Socio-economic factors: poverty, housing difficulties, prejudice

Preventing and addressing depression

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

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 avoid and enjoy in your diet.

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

Mindfulness

Mindfulness-based practices may help prevent the relapse of depressive episodes. Mindfulness interventions involve practicing awareness of the present moment. Formal mindfulness practices include body scanning, sitting meditation, and yoga. Informal mindfulness involves integrating mindfulness into daily activities, such as commuting. Consider using a meditation or mindfulness app to help introduce mindfulness practice into your routine.

Physical activity

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.

Social support

To reduce feelings of isolation, spend time with and seek support from a trusted friend or family member. Accept help when it is offered by a loved one, and seek out professional guidance in the form of therapy or counseling.

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