

DEPRESSION AND CANCER

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. According to the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) almost 3 million Canadians suffer from serious depression, but less than one third seek help.

Signs and symptoms of depression

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- 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

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:

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

If you think you are depressed or know someone who is, don't lose hope.

Seek help for depression.

(Contents adapted from the National Institute of Mental Health)

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