If you have a family history of depression or have been depressed in the past, there are some steps that you can take to prevent or manage depression. These steps can also help you better manage your depression if you are already depressed.

Stay connected with the important people in your life. Reaching out to your loved ones and talking with them about your feelings, hopes, and fears can greatly increase your risk of depression or slow your recovery. If you have no one to talk to, make new friends, join a club, attend services at a place of worship, or volunteer.

Get regular physical activity. Physical activity can actually improve your mood. Ask your health care provider about a regular activity program that’s right for you. It’s most important to choose an activity that you can do regularly for a half hour, most days. If you cannot do a half hour at one time, do 10 minutes of activity three times a day. Walking is a great exercise for almost everyone.

Eat right. Although many people do not realize it, a poor diet can affect how you feel. Avoid foods with lots of sugar or fat. Instead, choose fruits and vegetables, low-fat meats and dairy products, and whole grain foods. Avoid skipping meals during the day. Instead, eat four or five small meals each day.

Keep yourself busy. When you are feeling down, it’s tempting to do nothing. When you are doing nothing, you may be more likely to worry. Instead, schedule activities that bring you pleasure or feelings of accomplishment every day. Go to a movie, visit a place of worship, or do some housework.

Keep a positive attitude. Focusing on negative things in your life that you cannot control can make you feel worse. Try instead to focus on the positives in your life—your loved ones, your health, the beautiful day. Practice gratitude. Spend your time with people who are positive and encouraging.

This document is provided for informational purposes only. Always seek the advice of your health care provider or other qualified health care professional with any questions regarding a medical condition.
What Is Depression?

Depression is a common medical problem that affects people of all ages, races, and backgrounds. Depression can be a lifelong problem or can occur suddenly. About one in six people will experience depression at least once in their life.

While everyone feels down or blue at times, people with depression often feel sad, hopeless, or numb most of the time. However, not all people with depression feel sad or hopeless. Some people with depression may simply experience unexplained aches and pains. Others may have troubling digestive problems. There are many types of depression, ranging from mild to severe.

The good news is that depression is a medical condition that can be treated. Sadly, many people do not get help or do not get the right type of help for depression.

This brochure will help you recognize the warning signs and symptoms of depression. It will also help you or someone you love get the right help if needed.

What Causes Depression?

There are many causes of depression. In some cases, depression is caused primarily by physical problems. In other cases, linking psychological problems or difficult life experiences can lead to depression. Usually depression has several causes.

Most experts believe that an imbalance of the body's chemicals that regulate emotions is somehow involved in depression. Depression also seems to run in families. Other physical causes include the following:

• An imbalance in body hormones due to factors such as an underactive thyroid gland
• Medications prescribed for high blood pressure, anxiety, insomnia, swelling, or birth control
• Chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, or Alzheimer's disease
• Chronic pain related to arthritis, back problems, or headaches
• Postpartum depression in new mothers

Should We Worry about Increased Risk of Depression?

These two include the following:

• A major negative (or positive) life change such as a move, divorce, graduation, job change, or job loss
• Grief from the loss or death of a loved one
• Taking care of someone with a serious illness like Alzheimer's disease
• Physical or sexual abuse
• Alcohol or drug abuse

What Are the Warning Signs of Depression?

If you are depressed, you may experience several of the following emotional signs or symptoms almost every day:

• Sadness or hopelessness. You may feel guilty, empty, or numb. Everything may look "black.
• Nervousness, anxiety, or tension. You may have difficulty relaxing, concentrating, or making decisions.
• Frustration or irritability. You may find yourself becoming unusually short-tempered with loved ones.
• Lack of interest in activities that you used to enjoy. You may have given up favorite hobbies. You may no longer spend time with friends.
• Loneliness or isolation. You may believe that no one understands you. You may often feel "alone in a crowd."
• Thoughts of death or suicide. You may think that your loved ones would be better off without you. Or, you may often think about hurting yourself. If you have these thoughts, seek help immediately.

There are also physical symptoms of depression. These symptoms are not just "in your head." Depression can actually cause physical problems, including:

• Sleep problems. You may have a hard time falling asleep or staying asleep. You may find yourself waking an hour or two before your usual waking time.
• Digestive problems, loss of appetite, or weight loss. You may often feel sick to your stomach or experience frequent constipation or diarrhea. You may also overeat or gain excess weight.

Common Myths About Depression

• Depression is not a real medical illness
• Depression affects only weak people
• People with depression are feeling sorry for themselves
• Depression is a normal part of aging
• You cannot suffer from depression if your life is going well
• People can "snap out of" depression
• You just have to learn to live with depression.

What Are the Warning Signs of Depression in Children and Teenagers?

Children or teenagers who are depressed may also display the following warning signs or symptoms almost every day:

• A sudden drop in grades or school performance. Losing interest in school work. Difficulty concentrating in class.
• Disruptive behavior at school. Acting out in the classroom. Behaving aggressively, or violating the rules of others.
• Use of alcohol or drugs. Using alcohol or drugs to relieve feelings of sadness, loneliness, or anxiety
• Loneliness or isolation. Spending too much time alone.
• Disturbing or hopeless. Fear of trying new activities.

Take the First Step: Talking to Your Health Care Provider

There is no need to feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk to your health care provider about depression. Here are some words that you can use to get the conversation started:

“I just don’t feel like myself lately. 
“I am concerned I might not be sleeping well.
“I don’t want to enjoy my life anymore."
“My family is concerned I might be depressed.”

“I have heard depression can be treated. What do you recommend?”

What Should I Do If I Am Concerned about Depression?

If you or someone you love is experiencing several of the signs or symptoms of depression almost every day, get help now. Although depression might come and go over the years, seeking the right help now can help you feel better again. Even if you believe that you have been depressed for many years, it is never too late to solve your problems. If you or another chronic disease, depression can be a chronic problem must be managed for many years.