Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

A guide for children, teens, and caregivers



Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a treatable condition that affects mood, energy, interest, and daily life. In children and teens, depression may look like irritability or anger as well as sadness. Persistent changes can affect friendships, family life, and school. A clinician considers the whole picture before making a diagnosis.

Common symptoms

- Lasting sadness, hopelessness, or irritability
- Less interest in activities or friends
- Sleep, appetite, or energy changes
- Poor concentration or trouble at school
- Worthlessness, guilt, or thoughts of self-harm or suicide

Why does it happen?

Biology, temperament, and stressful experiences may contribute. Family history, trauma, and bullying can increase risk. No single cause explains every child's depression.

Treatment and outlook

Assessment includes symptoms, health, stress, and suicide risk. For mild adolescent depression, the care team may begin with active support and close monitoring. Persistent, moderate, or severe depression usually needs evidence-based treatment and sometimes specialist care.

CBT helps young people change unhelpful patterns and resume valued activities. Interpersonal psychotherapy for adolescents focuses on relationships and communication. Caregivers support the plan while the young person helps choose goals.

Medication may be appropriate, sometimes with therapy. Antidepressants require close follow-up, particularly early in treatment and after dose changes. Report worsening mood, agitation, or suicidal thoughts promptly; do not change or stop medicine without prescriber advice.

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Living with depression

Practical steps between appointments



Home and school

Connect: Check in gently, listen to your child, and identify a trusted adult they can turn to when feelings become overwhelming.

Build routines: Keep sleep and meals steady. Invite a short walk or enjoyable activity, without pressure to feel better right away.

Work together: Ask the school about support with attendance, concentration, or assignments. Keep appointments and share changes with the clinician.

When to seek help

Seek care for lasting mood changes. Ask directly about suicide if concerned.

For suicidal thoughts or self-harm: stay with your child, seek help now, and secure medicines and firearms.

Get urgent help

For suicidal thoughts or a mental health crisis, call or text **988** in the US. Call **911** for immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency. Children and teens: tell a trusted adult right away.

For your next appointment

What has changed in mood, sleep, school, or time with friends? What does your child want to regain? Ask how progress and safety will be checked and whom to contact between visits.

Learn more

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Sources and References

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