

Geriatric Depression: A Guide for Patients & Families

Geriatric depression is a form of depression that occurs in older adults. It can affect mood, thinking, energy level, sleep, and overall quality of life. Depression in later life is common but often overlooked because symptoms may be mistaken for normal aging or medical illness. With proper treatment and support, many people experience significant improvement.

Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Memory complaints or feeling mentally slowed down
- Trouble focusing on conversations or tasks
- Reduced motivation or difficulty initiating activities
- Feeling mentally fatigued or overwhelmed

Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Persistent sadness or low mood
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Social withdrawal or isolation

Physical Symptoms

- Changes in sleep (sleeping too much or too little)
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Fatigue or low energy
- Slowed movements or speech
- Increased aches and pains without a clear medical cause

Typical Presentation & Progression

Early Stage

- Persistent low mood or sadness
- Loss of interest in hobbies or social activities
- Mild changes in sleep, appetite, or energy
- Difficulty concentrating or feeling mentally slowed

Middle Stage

- Worsening sadness or hopelessness
- Increased withdrawal from family or social situations
- Noticeable difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Changes in appetite, sleep, and daily functioning

Late Stage

- Severe depression with major impact on daily life
- Loss of ability to maintain normal routines
- Possible suicidal thoughts or feelings of life not being worth living
- Increased dependence on others for support

Medications FDA-Approved for Depression

SSRI	SNRI	Atypical	MAOI	TCA	Adjunct
Sertraline (Zoloft®)	Venlafaxine (Effexor®)	Bupropion (Wellbutrin®)	Phenelzine (Nardil®)	Amitriptyline (Elavil®)	Aripiprazole (Abilify®)
Escitalopram (Lexapro®)	Desvenlafaxine (Pristiq®)	Bupropion (Aplenzin®)	Tranlycypromine (Parnate®)	Nortriptyline (Pamelor®)	Brexipiprazole (Rexulti®)
Citalopram (Celexa®)	Levomilnacipran (Fetzima®)	Bupropion (Forfivo XL®)	Isocarboxazid (Marplan®)	Imipramine (Tofranil®)	Quetiapine XR (Seroquel XR®)
Fluoxetine (Prozac®)	Duloxetine (Cymbalta®)	Mirtazapine (Remeron®)	Selegiline (Emsam®)	Desipramine (Norpramin®)	Olanzapine / Fluoxetine (Symbyax®)
Paroxetine (Paxil®)		Trazodone (Desyrel®)		Clomipramine (Anafranil®)	Cariprazine (Vraylar®)
Fluvoxamine (Luvox®)		Vilazodone (Viibryd®)		Doxepin (Sinequan®)	Esketamine (Spravato®)
Vortioxetine (Trintellix®)				Trimipramine (Surmontil®)	
				Amoxapine (Asendin®)	
				Protriptyline (Vivactil®)	

Other Treatment Options

- Psychotherapy (talk therapy), such as cognitive behavioral therapy
- Treatment of underlying medical problems that may worsen mood
- Exercise, structured daily routines, and social engagement
- In severe cases, treatments such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) may be considered

Diagnostic Tests Your Healthcare Team May Use

Clinical & Cognitive Evaluation

- Review of medical history and mood symptoms
- Screening questionnaires such as the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS)
- Cognitive testing if there are concerns about memory or thinking

Laboratory Tests

- Blood tests to rule out medical causes of depression (thyroid problems, vitamin deficiencies)
- Medication review to identify drugs that may worsen mood

Imaging Studies

- Brain imaging such as MRI or CT may be used if there are concerns about stroke, dementia, or other neurological conditions contributing to symptoms.

Planning for the Future

Healthcare Planning

- Discuss treatment options and goals of care
- Establish regular follow-up with healthcare providers
- Encourage healthy routines, social engagement, and physical activity

Legal & Financial Planning

- Maintain updated healthcare directives and power of attorney documents
- Plan for support services if depression affects daily functioning
- Review insurance coverage for mental health treatment

Support for Caregivers

- Encourage open communication and emotional support
- Help maintain structure and routines
- Seek caregiver support groups or counseling if needed

National Organizations & Resources

✓ National Institute on Aging (NIA)

☎ 800-438-4380 | 🌐 nia.nih.gov

✓ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

☎ 301-443-4513 | 🌐 nimh.nih.gov

✓ Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

☎ 800-826-3632 | 🌐 dbsalliance.org

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Depression in older adults is common and treatable.
- Early recognition and treatment can significantly improve quality of life.
- Family support, medical care, and community resources all play an important role in recovery.