

What You Must Know About Teen Depression

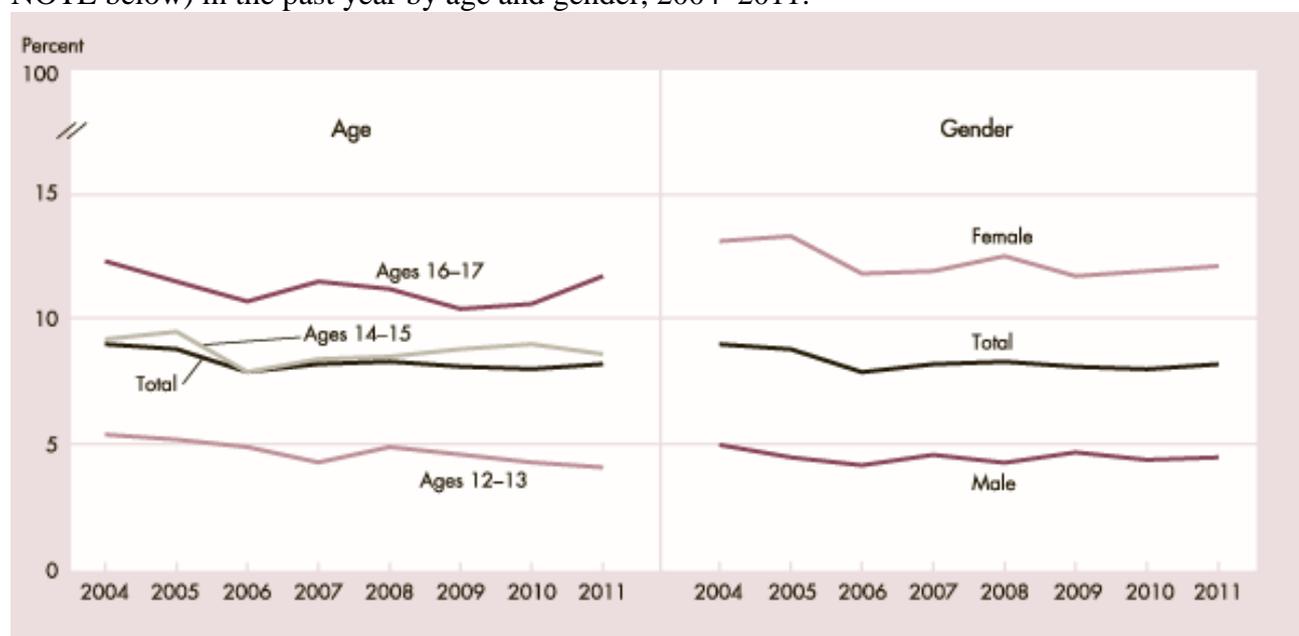
By Sorin Suci, MEd

What is teen depression?

Everybody feels sad or blue now and then. But it may be depression if you're sad most of the time and it's giving you problems with your relationships, your grades or attendance at school, alcohol, drugs or sex, or controlling your behaviour in any other way. Depression can affect your thoughts, feelings, behaviour and overall health.

How prevalent is teen depression?

Graph 1: Percentage of youth ages 12–17 who experienced a major depressive episode (MDE –see NOTE below) in the past year by age and gender, 2004–2011:



(Graph 1 from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/health4.asp>)

Table 1. Adolescent depression: Percentage of youth ages 12–17 who had at least one Major Depressive Episode (MDE) in the past year by age, gender, race and Hispanic origin, and poverty status, 2004–2011

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total	9.0	8.8	7.9	8.2	8.3	8.1	8.0	8.2
Age								
Ages 12–13	5.4	5.2	4.9	4.3	4.9	4.6	4.3	4.1
Ages 14–15	9.2	9.5	7.9	8.4	8.5	8.8	9.0	8.6
Ages 16–17	12.3	11.5	10.7	11.5	11.2	10.4	10.6	11.7
Gender								
Male	5.0	4.5	4.2	4.6	4.3	4.7	4.4	4.5
Female	13.1	13.3	11.8	11.9	12.5	11.7	11.9	12.1

NOTE: Major Depressive Episode (MDE) is defined as a period of at least 2 weeks when a person experienced a depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities and had at least four additional symptoms (such as problems with sleep, eating, energy, concentration, and feelings of self-worth) as described in the 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).¹

SOURCE: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

1 American Psychiatric Association. (1994). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Table 1 from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/health4.asp>

Who is at risk of developing depression during their teen years?

Sometimes people get seriously depressed after a divorce in the family, major financial problems, someone you love dying or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Other times — like with other medical conditions — depression just happens. It's important to get treatment for depression before it leads to other troubles.

What are the risk factors/triggers for teen depression?

There is no single cause of depression. Stressful and discouraging situations naturally overwhelm and have the potential to become serious. Experiences of failure commonly result in temporary feelings of worthlessness and self-blame, while personal loss causes feelings of sadness, disappointment and emptiness.

The onset of depression may be attributed to some of these factors:

- Genetic predisposition – a family member has depression
- Death or illness of friend/family member
- Financial difficulties
- Difficulties with job or personal relationship
- Poor self-esteem
- Seasonal or hormonal changes
- Addictions

Researchers believe that a deficiency of certain chemicals in the brain and/or genetics may also affect how likely we are to develop an on-going or serious depression. Any of the factors listed above may act as triggers to release disturbances in brain chemical function.

What are the symptoms of teen depression?

- You feel sad or cry a lot and it doesn't go away
- You don't feel like doing a lot of the things you used to like — music, sports, being with friends, going out — you want to be left alone most of the time
- You feel like you're no good; you've lost confidence
- Life seems meaningless or like nothing good is ever going to happen again. You have a negative attitude a lot of the time, or it seems like you have no feelings
- It's hard to make up your mind. You forget lots of things and it is hard to concentrate
- You get irritated often. Little things make you lose your temper and you overreact
- Your sleep pattern changes: you sleep a lot more or you have trouble falling asleep. Or you wake up really early and can't go back to sleep

- You've lost your appetite or you eat a lot more
- You feel restless and tired most of the time
- You think about death and dying or have thoughts about suicide

IMPORTANT: Talk to a professional if you've had **five or more** of these symptoms for more than two weeks. **If any of the symptoms cause such a big change that you can't keep to your usual routines, see your doctor.**

What you need to know about suicide

Most people who are depressed don't commit suicide. But depression increases the risk for suicide or suicide attempts. It is not true that people who talk about suicide do not attempt it. **Suicidal thoughts, remarks or attempts are ALWAYS SERIOUS. If any of these happen to you or a friend, tell a responsible adult immediately. It's better to be safe than sorry.**

Depression, alcohol and other drugs

A lot of depressed people, especially teenagers, also have problems with alcohol and other drugs. Sometimes the depression comes first and people try drugs as a way to escape it. Other times, the alcohol or other drug use comes first and depression is triggered by the drug itself, withdrawal from it or the problems that substance abuse creates.

Sometimes you can't tell which came first. The important point is that when you have both of these problems, the sooner you get treatment, the better. Either problem can make the other worse and lead to bigger trouble, like addiction or flunking school. You need to be honest about both problems—first with yourself and then with someone who can help get treatment. It's the only way to really get better and stay better.

What do I need to tell my doctor?

Having depression doesn't mean that a person is weak or a failure or isn't really trying. It means that they need treatment. Most people with depression can be helped by medication, counselling, or a combination of the two.

Talk to someone. If you are concerned about depression, talk to someone about it. There are people who can help get you treatment:

- A professional at a mental health centre
- A trusted family member
- Your family doctor
- Your clergy
- A school counsellor or nurse
- A social worker
- A responsible adult

What are the treatment options for teen depression?

Counselling means talking with a professional about thoughts, feelings, actions and relationships. You work together to find where problems exist and to learn how to make changes in the relationships, thoughts and behaviours that contribute to depression. Here are some specific questions the counsellor will ask:

1. Do you accept you have a problem?
2. Are you willing to explore all the possible dimensions of this problem?
3. Do you want to be made whole?
4. Are you willing to do what you can to contribute to the recovery process?
5. Do you trust the Counsellor when he/she tells you that you have good hope of recovery?

Medication effectively treats depression that is severe or disabling. Antidepressants are not “uppers” and are not addictive. Sometimes several types have to be tried before you and your doctor find the one that works best.

What are the things I need to do to get well?

- Stick to your treatment plan. Don't skip psychotherapy sessions. Even if you're feeling well, continue to take medication as prescribed.
- Learn about depression. Empower yourself by learning about your condition.
- Pay attention to the warning signs. Find out what triggers your depression. Make a plan so that you know what to do if your symptoms get worse. Contact your doctor or therapist if you notice any changes. Ask friends or family to watch out for warning signs.
- Get exercise. Physical activity may help reduce the symptoms of depression. Consider walking, jogging, swimming, gardening, or any other physical activity.
- Avoid alcohol and illicit drugs. It may seem like they lessen your problems, but in the long run, they generally worsen symptoms and make the depression harder to treat.
- Get adequate sleep. This is especially important. If you're having trouble sleeping, talk to your doctor about what you can do.