What is depression?
We all feel sad from time to time; it is part of life’s ups and downs. But when the feeling of upset won’t go away and you start to lose interest in the things you enjoy, then it may be a sign of depression.

Some common symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling unhappy most of the time
- Feeling worthless
- Feeling that life is pointless
- Worrying that you are seriously ill
- Low energy levels
- Difficulty remembering things
- Trouble sleeping

What makes older people vulnerable to depression?
There is a general agreement that when depression starts earlier in life, it is more likely to have a genetic cause. Researchers would estimate genetic risk by counting the number of your family members affected by depression. But when depression first occurs later in life, it is less likely to be genetic and more likely to be associated with ill health.

There appears to be a connection between depression and circulatory problems like heart disease and stroke. After a stroke or heart attack the risk of depression rises dramatically. Similarly, being depressed can increase the risks associated with those conditions.

How is depression different for older people?
While depression often affects older people in similar ways to younger people, it can be made worse by other factors like long-term illness.

Having depression in later life makes you more prone to experiencing memory loss and difficulty concentrating. If your depression starts in later life you may also be more prone to so-called executive function problems. This means having difficulty coordinating several activities to achieve one aim, such as preparing a meal.

Many of these problems with thinking and mental functioning will improve as your depression gets better. This means that psychological treatments (like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) may work better once the worst symptoms of the illness are over.

What triggers depression in later life?
You can become depressed at any age, but it is more common in later life (ages 65+). It
can be triggered by the events that are more likely to affect us as we get older such as poor health or bereavement. But even an apparently positive event like a longed-for and well-deserved retirement can also make you feel depressed, especially if you miss that stable work routine and sense of purpose.

Even though there may sometimes be an understandable cause for depression in later life, it does not mean that it should be accepted as normal and unavoidable. Depression is not an inevitable part of ageing. It can be treated and there is a range of therapies that can help.

**How does depression relate to physical illness?**
We know that physical illness is associated with a greater risk of depression. There are a number of possible explanations for this. Firstly, if you are in pain, have a disability, or are worried about loss of independence or even death, this can lead to anxiety which can lead to depression.

Secondly, physical illness can remove you from your usual supports, hobbies and rewarding occupations and can lock you into a vicious circle of isolation, low mood and thinking negatively about things.

Thirdly, physical illness may threaten to separate you from family and friends.

Importantly though, some physical illnesses may have a direct effect on the brain, causing your depression. These include diseases of the thyroid gland, severe lack of certain food stuff (e.g. vitamin B12) and certain cancers. Your doctor will consider these causes when assessing your depression and will usually order simple blood tests.

**Can depression be avoided?**
It is unlikely that depression can be completely avoided. You might be more vulnerable to developing depression simply because of your genetic predisposition or physical changes. However, based on what we know about depression there are some sensible steps that can be taken. Staying fit would be a good preventative measure along with eating a balanced diet. Not smoking and limiting alcohol could also help along with having adequate treatment for physical problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

People who have already suffered from depression are likely to be advised by their doctors to continue antidepressant treatment or psychological treatments (talking therapies) to help prevent the depression recurring.

**Other sources of help**

**Age Concern and Help the Aged**
Many local Age Concerns provide, or can direct you to, a range of support services such as:

- Information and advice
- Day centres and lunch clubs
- Befriending schemes
- Bereavement counselling, depression support, person-centred therapy
• Transport to activities
• Exercise programmes
• A free benefits check
• Insurance services
• Dementia care

For more information, or to find your nearest Age Concern, please contact our free National Information Line on **0800 00 99 66**.

More information about our depression campaign ‘Down, but not out’ and our free resources and factsheets can be found on our website:  
www.ageconcern.org.uk/downbutnotout

**Other factsheets in the series include:**

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**Depression Alliance**
Provides information and support services to those affected by depression
Telephone: 0845 123 23 20
Email: information@depressionalliance.org
Website: www.depressionalliance.org

**Alzheimer’s Society**
Gives support to families by linking them through membership and provides information on Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias.
Telephone: 020 7423 3500
Email: info@alzheimers.org.uk
Website: alzheimers.org.uk

**Aware (Ireland)**
Assists and supports those suffering from depression and their families in Ireland. A helpline is available as well as support groups, lectures, and current research on depression.
Telephone: 1890 303 302
Email: wecanhelp@aware.ie
Website: www.aware.ie/

**Samaritans**
Provide a confidential 24 hours a day helpline for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide.
Telephone: 1850 60 90 90 (24 hours)
Website: www.samaritans.org
Email: jo@samaritans.org
CRUSE - Bereavement Care
Offers a service of counselling, advice and opportunities for social contact to all bereaved people.
Telephone: 0870 167 1677
Email: helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk
Website: www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
Can help you to find a therapist in your area
Telephone: 01455 883 316
Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk
Website: www.bacp.co.uk

Depression UK
A national mutual support group for people suffering from depression
Email: info@depressionuk.org
Website: www.depressionuk.org

Healthtalk Online
People's accounts of their illnesses and treatment, including older people with depression in the Mental Health Section
Website: www.healthtalkonline.org/

Royal College of Psychiatrists
Provides free mental health information and leaflets.
Telephone: 020 7235 2351
Email: leaflets@rcpsych.ac.uk
Website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk

Recommended Reading
Depression and how to survive it, by S. Milligan and A. Clare
Malignant sadness: the anatomy of depression, by L. Wolpert
Managing depression by David Westbrook