Depression is a very common illness. About one third of people will experience mild depression at some time in their lives. At any given time, among the adult population, 3% of males and 6% of females are experiencing depression.

Between 2% and 3% of people suffer from severe depression. In this leaflet, we shall tell you about symptoms, causes and treatments for depression, and give helpful advice. Depression is also called excessive sadness, seriousness or agitated mind.

**Symptoms**
In this illness, the patient cannot concentrate, feels sad and has no interest in anything. The patient feels like crying without reason, and may complain of 'heart sinking' and, although the patient may feel like crying, may be unable to do so.

The patient may become irritable with friends, family or neighbours, and may find it difficult to control his/her temper. Some people may have headaches, heavy head or backaches. They may feel palpitations and lightness in the stomach, and may suffer from 'gas' which may affect their heart and brain. Patients do not feel like laughing, and stop enjoying things that had previously given them pleasure.

They may feel that their body is weak and cannot focus their mind. They may feel hopeless, and have bad and worrying thoughts about their family and their future. Some people may keep thinking about their past and become withdrawn. Others may attempt suicide and may keep having suicidal thoughts.

The patients may lose their appetite in this illness, and may sleep too much or too little. They may get up early, and may experience constipation and weight loss. They may also lose interest in sexual activity, and may feel tired all the time.

Sad thoughts preoccupy them, and they may feel worried without reason. They may develop feelings of inferiority and lose self-confidence. They may feel guilty and ashamed. In addition, mental and bodily tension, tiredness and loss of energy may occur.

Depression is not due to weakness of the brain. Without treatment, this illness may last a long time. There are several types of this illness, and severe depression may only occur once in some cases. It may occur in families and its effect may be very serious. In severe depression, guilt and self-blame, suspicion and the hearing of voices may occur.

Another variety of depression is less severe and, although it may not be deep, it may have a cumulative effect. This may lead to difficulties at work or business.
A third variety is manic-depression (bipolar disorder) where mania and depression may alternate. In manic episodes, patients may tear their clothes, wander around, spend large amounts of money, and may do odd things which may be embarrassing.

**Causes**
Some types of depression run in families, but do not affect everyone in the family. Depression may result from personal factors like death in the family or of someone close, loss in business, being sacked, excess work, or family conflicts. In some women, it may start after child birth. Changes in chemical substances in the brain can cause depression.

**Treatment**
Depression can be treated in many ways. Sometimes psychotherapy or counselling may be indicated, and at other times drugs. Some patients may need a combination of the two. Drugs balance the chemicals in the brain which cause depression. Sometimes, counselling or psychotherapy is essential, especially if the individual wants to understand the problems and reach solutions.

Some patients feel at peace going to the temple, the mosque or the gurdwara, and they may discuss their problems with the priest, pundit, imam or Gyani.

Drugs may produce tiredness initially, but usually within 2-3 weeks, they enable the individual to feel energetic, reduce worrying and increase appetite and sleep. With improvement in mood, the individuals can look for solutions to the underlying problems.

Because drugs take 3-4 weeks for full effect, it is essential that patients continue to take their medication, even though in the beginning they may not see any difference in their mental state. Some of these drugs can cause dryness of the mouth, blurring of vision and constipation which settle down after a few days. However, if they persist, the patient must discuss these with their nurse or doctor.

Even after full recovery, the drug treatment should be continued for at least six months. If the patient is seeing a psychologist or therapist, they should be told about the drugs.

If there is no response to drugs or counselling, ECT may be required. ECT is a safe treatment and one course (which may have 6 or 8 treatments) can be very beneficial in some cases.

**What should the patient do?**
Keep doing something. By sitting at home and thinking, worry will only increase your depression. Go for a walk or undertake tasks such as shopping. Even if you don’t feel like it, walking and exercise is good for health. By doing little things, self-confidence will increase and interest will develop. By doing so, pessimistic thoughts will decrease in frequency.
The patients should make sure they have a balanced diet and avoid constipation by eating fresh fruit and vegetables. It is important to remember that illness is not the patient’s fault and it will get better slowly.

Looking forward to the future, and talking about one’s worries and sorrows with family members, friends, doctors or nurses is useful. By keeping things inside, depression may become worse. Worrying about insomnia will not produce sleep. Doing yoga or light exercise before going to sleep, or having a hot drink, may help you sleep better.

Drinking alcohol in order to sleep is not a good idea and this may produce disturbed sleep. Alcohol will also increase depression and not reduce it.

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