

# Laurel Ridge Treatment Center

17720 Corporate Woods Drive • San Antonio, TX 78259-3509

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# Major Depression

## What is major depression?

Major depression is a medical illness affecting 9.9 million American adults. Unlike normal emotional experiences of sadness, loss, or passing mood states, major depression is persistent and significantly interferes with an individual's thoughts, behavior, mood, activity, and physical health.

## What are the symptoms of major depression?

The onset of the first episode of major depression may not be obvious if it is gradual or mild. The symptoms of major depression characteristically represent a significant change from how a person functioned before the illness. The symptoms of depression include:

- Profoundly sad or irritable mood
- Pronounced changes in sleep, appetite, and energy
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, and remembering
- Physical slowing or agitation
- Lack of interest in or pleasure from activities that were once enjoyed
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, and emptiness
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

## What are the causes of major depression?

Psychological, biological, and environmental factors may all contribute to its development. Major depression is a biological brain disorder. There is an increased risk for developing depression when there is a family history of the illness. Not everyone with a genetic predisposition develops depression, but some people probably have a biological make-up that leaves them particularly vulnerable to developing depression. Life events, such as the death of a loved one, a major loss or change, chronic stress, and alcohol and drug abuse, may trigger episodes of depression. Some illnesses and some medications may also trigger depressive episodes. It is also important to note that many depressive episodes occur spontaneously and are not triggered by a life crisis, physical illness, or other risks.

## How is major depression treated?

There are three basic types of treatment for depression: medications, psychotherapy, and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). They may be used singly or in combination.

### Medication

**Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs)** - still widely used for severe depression. TCAs elevate mood and activate behavior, but it often takes three to four weeks for an individual to respond.

**Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)** - are often effective in individuals who do not respond to other medications or who have "atypical" depressions with marked anxiety, excessive sleeping, irritability, hypochondria, or phobic characteristics.

**Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** - act specifically on the neurotransmitter serotonin. In general, SSRIs cause fewer side effects than TCAs and MAOIs.

**Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)** - useful as first-line treatments in people taking an antidepressant for the first time and for people who have not responded to other medications. In general, SNRIs cause fewer side effects than TCAs and MAOIs.

**Psychotherapy** - There are several types of psychotherapy that have been shown to be effective for depression, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT). Research has shown that mild to moderate depression can often be treated successfully with either therapy alone. However, severe depression appears more likely to respond to a combination of psychotherapy and medication.

**Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)** - ECT is a highly effective treatment for severe depressive episodes. In situations where medication, psychotherapy, and a combination of the two prove ineffective, or work too slowly to relieve severe symptoms, such as psychosis or thoughts of suicide, ECT may be considered.

### **What are the side effects of the medications used to treat depression?**

All medications have side effects. Different medications produce different side effects, and people differ in the amount and severity of side effects they experience. Side effects that are particularly bothersome can often be treated by changing the dose of the medication, switching to a different medication, or treating the side effect directly with an additional medication.

**Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs)** cause side effects that include dry mouth, constipation, bladder problems, sexual problems, blurred vision, dizziness, drowsiness, skin rash, and weight gain or loss.

**Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)** - Individuals taking MAOIs may have to be careful about eating certain smoked, fermented, or pickled foods, drinking certain beverages, or taking some medications because they can cause severe high blood pressure in combination with the medication. A range of other, less serious side effects occur, including weight gain, constipation, dry mouth, dizziness, headache, drowsiness, insomnia, and sexual side effects (problems with arousal or satisfaction).

**SSRIs, and SNRIs** tend to have fewer and different side effects, such as nausea, nervousness, insomnia, diarrhea, rash, agitation, or sexual side effects (problems with arousal or satisfaction).

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