WHAT IS A CHRONIC PHYSICAL ILLNESS?

A chronic physical illness is an enduring health problem that will not go away – for example diabetes, asthma, arthritis, cancer. Chronic physical illnesses can be managed, but they cannot be cured. People who live with a chronic illness have a greater risk of developing depression.

Common chronic physical illnesses

- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Diabetes
- Cancer
- Arthritis
- Asthma

Less common chronic physical illnesses that can also be associated with depression include chronic pain, Parkinson’s disease and chronic fatigue syndrome.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is not just a low mood, but a serious health condition which affects a person’s biological functioning and well-being for a sustained period. People with depression find it hard to carry out their normal daily activities. Depression can seriously affect a person’s physical and mental health.

People with depression can experience a prolonged, uncharacteristic period of low mood, reduced interest in activities, tiredness, disturbance of sleep and appetite, and negative thoughts and feelings.

To find out about the general symptoms of depression, go to the series of depression checklists at www.beyondblue.org.au or call the beyondblue info line on 1300 22 4636.

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND CHRONIC PHYSICAL ILLNESS?

Research indicates there are strong links between depression and chronic physical illness.

- Depression is common – one in five women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime.¹ For people who live with a chronic physical illness, this figure is even higher. Research shows that 28 per cent of people with a chronic physical condition also have a mental disorder.²

- Having a chronic physical illness puts a person at greater risk of developing depression.³ The symptoms of chronic physical illnesses, as well as some of the treatments, can result in major lifestyle changes which may cause severe disruptions to a person’s work/social life and create financial difficulties.

- Depression also increases the likelihood of developing a chronic physical illness, particularly heart disease, stroke and diabetes.³

- For people with a chronic physical illness, depression makes living with their condition even more difficult. It can make it harder for people to find the energy to eat healthily, exercise or take medication regularly. Depression is more debilitating than the feelings of frustration or disappointment at having a chronic health problem. There is a sense of loss of enjoyment, as well as the other characteristic changes described overleaf.

- Having a chronic physical illness can also make it seem like an effort to connect with family members and friends. This can make the person with the illness feel isolated and make it harder for them to recover from depression.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results (4326.0), Canberra, ABS.
**HOW IS DEPRESSION DIFFERENT FROM SADNESS?**

Having a chronic physical illness can cause worry, stress and sadness. It can be difficult to know if a person is just feeling low because of all the changes in their life or if the person really has depression.

A person may be depressed, if for **more than two weeks** they have:
- Felt sad, down or miserable most of the time OR
- Lost interest or pleasure in most of their usual activities and
- Experienced symptoms in **at least three of the following four categories:**
  - Feelings
    - Overwhelmed
    - Guilty
    - Irritable
    - Frustrated
    - Unhappy
    - Indecisive
    - Disappointed
    - Miserable
    - Sad, tearful
  - Thinking
    - "I’m a failure."
    - "It’s my fault."
    - "Nothing good ever happens to me."
    - "I’m worthless."
    - "Life is not worth living."
  - Behaviour
    - Stopped going out
    - Not getting things done at work
    - Withdrawing from family and friends
    - Relying on alcohol and sedatives
    - Stopped doing things they once enjoyed
    - Inability to concentrate

**Physical**
- Tired all the time
- Sick and run down
- Slowness of movement
- Slowness of thinking
- Headaches and muscle/stomach pains
- Sleep disturbance
- Poor appetite/weight loss

**CAN PEOPLE WITH DEPRESSION AND CHRONIC PHYSICAL ILLNESS BE TREATED?**

There is a range of treatments that can be effective for people with depression and a chronic physical illness. Treatment may include psychological therapies and/or medication.

**Psychological treatments**

**Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)** is one of the most researched psychological therapies and has a lot of evidence to support its effectiveness in treating people for depression and anxiety disorders. It teaches people to think realistically about common difficulties, helping them to change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations. Behavioural therapy approaches have been shown to be very helpful for depression and many anxiety disorders.

**Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)** has also been researched and found to be effective for treatment of depression. It helps people find new ways to get along with others and to resolve losses, changes and conflict in relationships.

**Medication**

Antidepressant medication is often prescribed, alongside psychological treatments, when a person experiences a moderate to severe episode of depression and/or anxiety. Sometimes they are also prescribed when other treatments have not been helpful.

Making a decision about which antidepressant is best for a person can be complex. This decision should be made in consultation with a doctor after careful assessment and consideration. The prescribing health professional should discuss differences in effects and possible side-effects of medications.

It’s important that any current medication for the chronic physical illness, including over-the-counter medications and herbal or natural remedies, is reviewed by a medical practitioner before the person starts taking antidepressants.
There are many different types of antidepressant medication. Your doctor may need to find the medication and dose which is most effective for you. Keep in mind antidepressants take time before they start to help (at least two weeks).

Like any medication, the length of time a person takes antidepressants depends on the severity of the illness and how the person responds to treatment. For some people, antidepressants are needed only for a short time (generally six to 12 months) with psychological treatments and self-help techniques being sufficient. For others, antidepressants are needed on an ongoing basis – in the same way that someone with asthma would use respiratory medication.

Stopping medication should only be done gradually, on a doctor’s recommendation and under supervision.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (Australia’s regulatory agency for medical drugs) and manufacturers of antidepressants do not recommend antidepressant use for treating depression in young people under the age of 18. For more information see beyondblue Fact sheet 11 – Antidepressant medication.

How to help someone with depression
If you suspect that you or someone you know may have depression, the following tips may be helpful.

- Speak to a doctor about your concerns.
- Get help, support and encouragement from family and friends.
- Learn more about depression and the chronic physical illness.
- Become involved in social activities.
- Exercise regularly.
- Eat healthily and include a wide variety of nutritious foods.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Limit alcohol intake.
- Go to a doctor for regular check-ups.

WHERE TO GET HELP
A General Practitioner (GP) is a good person with whom to discuss your concerns in the first instance. Your GP will be able to conduct or arrange any necessary medical tests, provide treatment or refer you to a mental health professional. It is recommended that you go to your regular GP or another GP in the same clinic as they will have access to your medical file. If you don’t have a regular GP or clinic, a list of GPs with expertise in treating common mental health problems is available at www.beyondblue.org.au – click Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner or call the beyondblue info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost from a landline).

Psychologists can assist people who are having difficulty controlling their emotions, thinking and behaviour. Clinical psychologists are specialists in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness such as depression, anxiety and related disorders. For a list of psychologists with expertise in treating mental health problems, visit www.beyondblue.org.au and click Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner or call the beyondblue info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost from a landline).

Psychiatrists are doctors who have undergone specialist training to treat all mental disorders. They can make medical and psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. Depending on their expertise and type of practice, they can also provide psychological treatments such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). Some have particular areas of specialty. If you would like a consultation with a psychiatrist, you will need a referral from your GP.

Mental health nurses are specially trained to care for people with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and related disorders. They work with psychiatrists and General Practitioners to review a person’s mental health, monitor medication and provide information about mental health problems and treatment. Some have training in psychological therapies. If you would like a referral to a mental health nurse who works in a general practice, ask your GP.

Social workers in mental health are specially trained to work with people who are experiencing difficulties in their life. Social workers can support people with depression, anxiety and related disorders by helping them find ways to manage more effectively some of the situations that trigger these disorders such as family issues, financial problems, work stress and living arrangements. Mental health social workers can also provide focused psychological self-help strategies. For a list of social workers with expertise in managing depression, anxiety and related disorders, visit www.beyondblue.org.au and click Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner or call the beyondblue info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost from a landline).

Occupational therapists in mental health help people who have difficulties functioning because of a mental health problems (such as anxiety or depression) to participate in normal, everyday activities. Mental health occupational therapists can also provide focused psychological self-help strategies. For a list of occupational therapists with expertise in managing depression, anxiety and related disorders visit www.beyondblue.org.au and click Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner or call the beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636 (local call cost from a landline).
MORE INFORMATION

**beyondblue**

www.beyondblue.org.au
Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help

**beyondblue** Fact sheet 18 – Depression and coronary heart disease
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 19 – Depression and diabetes
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 20 – Depression after stroke
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 25 – Depression and dementia
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 26 – Depression and asthma
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 27 – Depression and arthritis
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 32 – Depression and Parkinson’s disease
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 34 – Prostate cancer and the risk of depression /anxiety
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 41 – Depression and incontinence
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 43 – Anxiety disorders and depression in men with testicular cancer
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 46 – Brain tumours, depression and anxiety disorders
**beyondblue** Fact sheet 47 – Depression and anxiety disorders in people with epilepsy

**beyondblue** booklet – Maintaining your well-being: Information on depression and anxiety for men with prostate cancer and their partners

**beyondblue** Guide for Carers: Supporting and caring for a person with depression, anxiety and/or a related disorder

**beyondblue** DVD: Carers’ Stories of Hope and Recovery

**beyondblue**/Diabetes Australia-Vic DVD Taking Control: Diabetes, depression and anxiety

**beyondblue**/Stroke Foundation DVD Tackling depression after stroke

**beyondblue** info line 1300 22 4636
Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and referral only (local call)

www.youthbeyondblue.com
beyondblue’s website for young people – information on depression and how to help a friend

**Asthma Foundations of Australia**

www.asthmaaustralia.org.au
1800 645 130
Information, advice, education, counselling and support for people with asthma

**Diabetes Australia**

www.diabetesaustralia.com.au
1300 136 588
Information about diabetes

**Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)**

www.bcna.org.au
1800 500 258
Information and resources for women with breast cancer

**National Heart Foundation of Australia**

www.heartfoundation.org.au
1300 36 27 87
Information on a range of heart-health topics

**National Stroke Foundation**

www.strokefoundation.com.au
1800 787 653
Information on stroke

**Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia**

www.prostate.org.au
1800 220 099
Information on prostate cancer

**The Cancer Council Australia**

www.cancer.org.au
13 11 20
Information about cancer

**Lifeline**

13 11 14
24 hour counselling, information and referral (local call)

**MensLine Australia**

www.menslineaus.org.au
1300 78 99 78
24 hour telephone support, information and referral for men

**THINGS TO REMEMBER**

- For people with a chronic physical illness, depression is common.
- Help and effective treatments are available.
- With the right treatment, most people recover from depression.
- It’s important to seek help early – the sooner the better.
- Depression is not a weakness and people shouldn’t feel ashamed to seek help.