

Depression and Epilepsy

What is Depression?

Most people have felt depressed or down at some point in their life. Feelings of discouragement, frustration, and even despair are normal reactions to loss or disappointment. When feelings like these last for two weeks or longer and begin to interfere with work, family, and other aspects of life, the low mood may be a sign of a major depressive disorder, also known as clinical depression. Depression can also be triggered by chemical changes in the brain related to hormones. Sometimes depression does not show itself as sadness, but instead as a sense of emotional numbness or emptiness. Other signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Disrupted sleep
- Significant changes in appetite or weight
- Feeling tired or having little energy
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Moving or speaking more slowly than usual, or being so fidgety or restless that others notice
- Thoughts that life is not worth living, or that you are no good to anyone

How are Depression and Epilepsy Related?

Depression occurs more often in people with epilepsy than in the general population. It can present in a variety of ways:

- a) Symptoms of depression may occur just before the actual seizure happens. The symptoms are usually brief and the individual returns to their normal mood after the seizure is over.
- b) Symptoms of depression may occur after a seizure. In this situation, the depressive symptoms are relatively brief and may last for a number of hours. Symptoms can potentially last for up to two weeks however, this is rare.
- c) The most common presentation of depression in patients with epilepsy is between seizures. This type of depression is not affected by seizure control. In this type of chronic depression, the person may appear to lack pleasure in everyday activity, is often irritable, and may have feelings of hopelessness, fear, and anxiety.

Generally, depression usually has no single cause and often results from a combination of factors. In those with epilepsy a number of factors may also contribute to depression:

- a) Family and genetic associations can be important. Depression occurs more commonly when there is a close family member with depression.
- b) Epilepsy may be caused by brain injury such as trauma, brain infection or stroke. These brain injuries may also predispose the person to depression.
- c) Antiepileptic drugs may be responsible for mood changes, e.g., phenobarbital has been known to cause depression. Use of multiple antiepileptic drugs may also increase the risk of depression.



d) The challenges of living with epilepsy may lead to mood changes, which is a common problem for many people coping with a chronic condition. People with epilepsy may feel frustrated by the unpredictability of seizures, the inability to drive or work, or being singled out by others as “different.”

How is Depression Treated?

It is important to seek medical advice before starting any kind of treatment. Sometimes working with your doctor to get better control of uncontrolled seizures improves depression. When that does not work, antidepressant medication and/or therapy may be very helpful.

Antidepressants are prescription medications used to treat depression. The type of medication chosen will depend on the type of mood disorder you have, the possible side effects of the medication, and how it may affect your seizures or seizure medication. Just as in treating seizures, your doctor might have to try more than one different medication before finding the most effective single drug or combination of drugs that work for you. Anti-depressants must not be stopped suddenly or your symptoms may come back because of withdrawal side effects. To achieve the best results, use the medication as directed by your physician.

Psychotherapy is also known as counseling or “talk” therapy. Working with a trained mental health professional can support you through a difficult period. It can help you understand aspects of your life situation in a new way and try out ways of thinking and responding that may lead to greater well being. Local sources of free or low-cost counseling services in your community can be discovered by contacting the BC Mental Health Information Line at 1-800-661-2121.

How Can I Help Myself?

Positive lifestyle changes such as exercising, sticking to a daily routine, eating healthy well-balanced meals, getting enough rest, avoiding alcohol and non-prescription drugs, and making time to do things you enjoy can improve mood.

Overcoming depression is possible with medical treatment, learning about the condition and by seeking support. If you think you have depression, see your family doctor or neurologist. You may be referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist who is specialized in treating depression.

Living with epilepsy and having a mood disorder such as depression might seem overwhelming at first. Learning all you can about your condition and seeking answers to your questions will help you adjust over time.

Additional Resources:

Epilepsy Foundation and epilepsy.com: Both of these websites have detailed information about the relationship between epilepsy and depression. Epilepsy Foundation: www.epilepsyfoundation.org epilepsy.com: www.epilepsy.com

Bounce Back: Reclaim Your Health: www.cmha.bc.ca/bounceback

A program designed to help adults experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety through online and telephone support.

Here to Help: www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Information on mental health, mental disorders, substance abuse issues and inspiring personal stories.

Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre: www.keltymentalhealth.ca 604-524-7000

Works to link children, youth and their families with appropriate resources in all areas of mental health and addictions.

Crisis Centre of BC: www.crisiscentre.bc.ca 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)

Operates a phone line to provide help, support and someone to listen to when you are feeling emotionally overwhelmed, vulnerable or troubled. It operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Counselling BC: www.counsellingbc.com

An extensive directory of psychologists, counsellors and other professional therapists.

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You can join the BC Epilepsy Society as a member and receive all the program and service benefits.

#2500 – 900 West 8th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 1E5

(604) 875-6704 Fax: (604) 875-0617 info@bcepilepsy.com www.bcepilepsy.com