

Dear Dr. Garner:

I am a 44-year-old who should be very happy. I have two lovely children, a wonderful husband and a great life. The problem is that I am constantly sad. The worst part is there is nothing that should make me sad. I can't sleep at night, my appetite is poor and I don't even feel like getting dressed in the morning. What can I do?

Sad in Sheepshead Bay

Dear Sad, I want you to know that you can be helped and I urge you to make an appointment with your family doctor, so he can refer you to a psychiatrist, who can help you.

I will review the topic of depression, and discuss what the treatment options are.

The exact cause of depression is not known. Most people believe it is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. It may be hereditary, or caused by events in a person's life. Depression may be brought on by:

- Disappointment at home, work or school.
- Death of a friend or relative.
- Prolonged pain or having a major illness.
- Medical conditions such as hypothyroidism, cancer or hepatitis.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.
- Chronic stress.
- Childhood events like abuse or neglect.
- Social isolation (common in the elderly).
- Nutritional deficiencies.
- Sleeping problems.

Some types of depression seem to run in families, but it can occur in people who have no family history. Depression is a common condition. Each year more than 18 million Americans suffer from depression. It occurs more often in women. Women are especially susceptible to depression after giving birth. While many new mothers experience temporary "blues," if the depression lasts longer than two weeks, it is not normal and requires treatment.

A definition for major depression is when a person has five or more of the following symptoms for more than two weeks:

- Trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping.
- A dramatic change in appetite, often with weight gain or loss.
- Fatigue and lack of energy.
- 4. Feelings of worthlessness, or inappropriate guilt.
- Extreme difficulty concentrating.
- Agitation, restlessness, and irritability.
- Inactivity and withdrawal from usual activities, a loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyable.
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

The treatment is usually medication and counseling. The symptoms of depression are caused by imbalance in chemicals in the brain and other parts of the body that influence things like mood, sleep and how much energy we have. Antidepressant medication acts to rebalance the chemicals. It may take up to eight weeks before you notice an improvement. It is usually recommend-

ed that the medications be taken for at least four to nine months after the depressive symptoms have improved. Electroshock therapy may be needed to control severely depressed or suicidal patients who don't respond to medical treatment. As barbaric as this treatment option might seem, it is actually quite safe, and highly effective. Research is now being performed to evaluate magnetic stimulation of the brain, which works similar to electroshock therapy. As I noted in an earlier column, use of light therapy for depressive symptoms in the winter months may be effective in relieving depression, but not the severe type that you are describing.

As the condition is being treated, it is important to eat well-balanced meals, avoid alcohol and drugs and get regular exercise and sleep. Many people are trying herbal products for depression, such as St. John's wort. A large study, recently done in the United States, found that St. John's wort was NOT effective for treating major depression.

The outcome of the treatment for major depression is usually good, however, it can become a recurring problem. It may be necessary to maintain treatment on an ongoing basis to prevent recurrences.

Some general tips that may help prevent depression include learning to relax and manage stress, avoiding alcohol, drugs and caffeine, exercising regularly, and maintaining good sleeping habits.

You will know that your treatment plan is working, as you will start to sleep better, your appetite will improve, and you will have more energy. You will feel less sad, and be more optimistic about the future. I urge you to be patient, as you probably won't see the full effects of the medication for about six-to-eight weeks.

For our readers over the age of 65, remember that depression is not a normal part of growing older. Retirement, health problems and the loss of loved ones are things that happen to older adults. Feeling sad at these times is normal. If these feelings persist and keep you from your usual activities, you should talk to your doctor. It can be very hard to recognize depression in older adults, as they may not talk to their doctor about their sad or anxious feelings because they are embarrassed.

#### Don't Be Embarrassed

Depression is nothing to be embarrassed about. It is not a personal weakness, but a medical illness, that can be treated. Older adults with depression are at high risk for suicide. It is important that if anyone is having suicidal thoughts that they tell their doctor, friends or family right away. There are local suicide hot lines listed in the phone book. After treatment of the depression, the thoughts of suicide will go away.

I really appreciate that you have brought this question up, as this is an illness that can be treated. I am confident, that you will be back to normal soon, and appreciating the wonderful life you have.

Next week, we hear from a reader with thyroid disease. Until then, stay well and have a great week.

*Dr. Steven Garner, MD, is affiliated with St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Centers. He also is the host of the popular call-in TV show "Ask the Doctor" seen locally on The Prayer Channel.*