



Women and Depression

Depression is a common and highly treatable mood disorder. It can manifest as feelings of sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness. Depression can be mild, moderate, or major, with symptoms of apathy, little appetite, difficulty sleeping, low self-esteem, and low-grade fatigue.

Major depression and other depressive disorders such as bipolar (manic) depression affect 1 in 10 U.S. adults each year, and are the leading cause of disability in the United States. It is also the third most common reason for adults to seek health care. Recurrent major depression increases the risk for suicide, which in 2007 was the 6th leading cause of premature death in Los Angeles County. (1)

The personal cost to quality of life and the high economic burden caused by treatment costs and decreased productivity and absenteeism in the workplace make depression a significant public health issue.

Major depression affects women more frequently than men. In Los Angeles County, 13.6% of adults report ever being diagnosed with a depressive disorder, with women being affected 1 ½ times more than men. (16.6% of women compared to 10.3% of men.) (1)

Women with a depressive disorder often suffer higher rates of other chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, headaches, hypertension, and back or joint pain. A depressive disorder can increase women's risk for complications or death related to the chronic condition.

Causes of depression in women

There is no single cause of major depression. Psychological, biological, genetic, socio-economic and environmental factors may all contribute to its development. Whatever the specific causes of depression, scientific research has firmly established that major depression is a biological, medical illness. (2)

- Genetics – Having a first degree relative with a history of depression is a risk factor for depression.
- Brain chemistry and hormones – At certain times in a women's life, her hormones are changing which may affect her brain chemistry, such as after having a baby. Such hormonal changes may be overwhelming. Other times of hormonal change such as the transition to menopause may also increase a woman's risk for depression.
- Life stress and trauma – Uncontrollable or traumatic life events such as loss of a loved one, childhood abuse, living in poverty, witnessing an act of violence, racial or ethnic discrimination or any other stressful situation can trigger depression in some women.(2)

Culture and depression

Concepts of mental well-being vary among women of different ethnic groups and cultures and are also influenced by their level of acculturation, education, and socioeconomic status.

It is very important that both primary care physicians and mental health specialists keep in mind that cultural responsiveness is crucial to the diagnosis, treatment and care of depression.(3)

Treatment for depression

Although major depression can be a devastating illness, it is highly treatable. Between 80-90 percent of persons diagnosed with major depression can be effectively treated and return to their usual daily activities and feelings. Many types of treatment are available, and the type chosen depends on the individual and the severity and patterns of her illness. (2)

References:

(1) <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/docs/HealthNews/2011janLAHealthDepression.pdf>

(2) <http://www.nami.org/>

(3) Kleinman A (2004) Culture and depression. N Engl J Med 351: 951–952