

Mind matters

Depression: alternatives to drug treatment



Talking therapies, diet, exercise and health supplements - *Lesley Dobson* examines the alternatives to drug treatment for depression

If you suspect you could be depressed, talk to your GP. Prompt diagnosis and treatment can stop it becoming worse.

If you have mild depression, and your GP thinks that you're likely to get better without treatment, they may ask to come back in a couple of weeks' time, to see how you're feeling. It's worth asking for advice if there's anything that's causing particular problems – indigestion, for instance, or insomnia. You won't normally be prescribed antidepressants if you have mild depression, although may be given them if you've had more serious depression in the past or if you've been depressed for a long time.

Talking therapies

There are a variety of talking therapies available, but you may have to wait some time for them. The average wait, according to the charity SANE, is around 18 months. The Government has is investing millions of pounds in psychological therapies, and aims to eventually cut waiting time to two weeks, but in the meantime, you should ask your GP about the local situation. Some GPs' surgeries have counsellors attached to their practices, which may mean a shorter wait for treatment.

If you can pay for private treatment, your GP may be able to put you in touch with a private therapist. Be sure though, that you choose one who is registered or accredited.

Different approaches

- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT): focuses on teaching you to challenge negative thought patterns.
- Psychodynamic Therapy: helps you to look at difficulties in your past and deal with feelings of guilt, aggression and inadequacy.
- Counselling: allows you to talk about your life, and the areas that may be influencing your feelings of depression.
- Interpersonal Therapy (IPT): looks at your relationships with others and helps you improve how you see yourself.

Talking therapies and antidepressants may work better if you have both at the same time.

Exercise

Taking a [brisk walk](#) may sound old-fashioned, but studies have shown that [regular exercise](#) can help you feel better, and sometimes prevent depression developing in the first place.

Exercise triggers the release of your body's feel-good chemicals, endorphins, which may help ease your symptoms. Taking exercise also gives you targets to aim for, and gets you up and out and meeting people.

Thirty minutes' moderate exercise, five or more days a week, should be the minimum that we all aim for. You can do this on your own, with a friend, or join a club. Your GP may also be able to refer you for 'Exercise on Prescription'. There are around 1,300 of these schemes in the UK. Ask your GP if there's one near you.

Diet

A balanced diet, with at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day, plenty of fibre, some protein and small amounts of fat and salt, should help keep your health on track. But if you don't feel physically well, you're less likely to feel emotionally well and positive. And if you're lacking certain nutrients it can have an impact on your mental health. Protein, for instance, contains the amino acid tryptophan, which affects your mood.

Low levels of omega-3 oils – found in [oily fish](#) such as mackerel, sardines and salmon, flaxseed oil, rapeseed oil and walnuts - are also linked to depression. A number of small studies have shown that giving omega-3 oils alongside conventional drug treatment improved patients' symptoms.

It's also important to [watch what you drink](#). Keeping your non-alcoholic fluids up is important, as dehydration can affect you mentally, making you confused and irritable. Keeping to a moderate alcohol intake is also important as alcohol is a depressant.

St John's Wort

[St John's Wort](#) is a herbal remedy that is known to help ease the symptoms of mild to moderate depression. It's available over the counter, but GPs aren't allowed to prescribe it. While it can be helpful, take it with caution, as it can react with other medicines. If you are on other medication, talk to your GP or pharmacist before taking St John's Wort. You shouldn't take it if you're already taking SSRI or MAOI antidepressants.

St John's Wort is widely available, but it can come in varying strengths and preparations depending on the brand, so read the label carefully. It can take up to four weeks to have any effect.

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