

Depression and dementia

Depression is a state of persistently low mood and sadness. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between depression and dementia, since the symptoms are very similar, for example a lack of initiative, forgetfulness and concentration problems.

Typical signs of depression

About 10% of all people suffer from depression at some time during their lives; however, some depressions go unrecognised or untreated. The symptoms of depression vary from person to person. Apart from having low spirits and feelings of sadness, a depressed person may be self-reproaching, experience insomnia, have little appetite or lose interest in social activities. It is quite common for these symptoms to be more acute in the morning and for a person's mood to improve towards the evening.

Other forms of depression

Depression can manifest itself, however, in many ways. Atypical symptoms such as restlessness, irritability and aggression are also known as agitated depression.

Winter depression is a widespread phenomenon in Denmark during the months of the year with fewer daylight hours. Symptoms of winter depression include fatigue, an increased need to sleep and a craving for high-sugar and high-carb foods such as sweets or cake.

High alcohol consumption can also be an indication of an untreated depression. Some people feel uncomfortable about consulting their doctor if they feel down and instead drink alcohol or take sedatives to dull their feelings. Excessive alcohol consumption is harmful to the brain and increases the risk of depression and dementia.

Difficult to diagnose

Depression can also be one of the first signs of the onset of dementia. Since symptoms overlap, it can be difficult to diagnose dementia in a person suffering from depression.

Often, it is necessary to treat the depression before examining for signs of dementia. If someone is suffering from depression only, the symptoms, such as concentration problems and forgetfulness, will often disappear once the depression has been treated.

Depression frequently occurs in conjunction with dementia. Up to half of all people with Alzheimer's disease develop symptoms of depression at some stage. People with dementia who are depressed are rarely suicidal, however.

Drugs and therapy can help

Counselling alone may be sufficient to treat mild depression, although a combination of drugs and therapy is considered the most effective treatment in moderate to severe depression.

Often it takes two to twelve weeks before the antidepressive drugs start to work. Side effects vary from one drug to the other. If side effects occur, it may be advisable to switch to another drug. Modern antidepressive medications are not addictive and rarely cause serious side effects.

Older adults with depression often need to be treated over a longer period, in some cases, for the rest of their lives, while younger adults generally require treatment for at least 6 to 12 months. In the case of recurrent depression, treatment usually lasts several years.

Winter depression is best treated using light therapy, in other words, special lamps that emit bright light similar to daylight. Physical exercise can have a beneficial effect and improve the person's mood and well-being.

Local contact information: