

# Your mental and physical health are related

## Depression is commonly experienced alongside other health problems, such as chronic physical illness, alcohol and drug problems, and anxiety.

Doctors interviewed in recent New Zealand research identified mental health problems in about half of the people they see, even though many were seeing their doctor for a physical complaint.

People with chronic (long term) physical conditions are more likely to have depression than those who are physically well. Studies have found, for example, that about 30% of people with diabetes also have depression.

Depression also increases a person's likelihood of developing a physical illness, particularly heart disease or stroke.

## + what to look out for

### Physical Illness

Common chronic (long term) physical illnesses that are associated with depression are:

- Respiratory conditions such as asthma, emphysema and other chronic lung disease.
- Chronic bronchitis.
- Heart disease.
- Stroke.
- High blood pressure.
- Chronic pain, including arthritis, rheumatism, back or neck problems, severe headaches.
- Diabetes.
- Cancer.

## If you want to talk to someone who can help:

Call the Depression Helpline on **0800 111 757**

Text The Lowdown team for free on **5626**

Or talk to your doctor

The symptoms of chronic physical illnesses, and some of the treatments, can result in lifestyle changes and disruptions to a person's work and social life, and create financial hardship.

It's harder for people with a chronic physical illness to improve their health if they are also depressed. They may not have the motivation to make sure they eat well, for example. Having a physical illness can also make it hard to stay connected with family and friends. This can make the person with the illness feel isolated, which in turn makes it harder to recover from the depression.

Some chronic illnesses can also make it very hard for the person to stay physically active, and this increases both the risk of the person becoming depressed, and the difficulty of managing the depression.

**For people with chronic physical illness who are also depressed, it's important that the depression is treated as well as the physical illness. Make sure you discuss how you are feeling with your doctor or specialist.**

## Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are also commonly associated with depression – in fact about half of people who experience depression also have an anxiety disorder. See Fact Sheet 3 on Anxiety.

This is partly because people with anxiety disorders often become worried or upset about their problem, and this may lead to them becoming depressed as well.

Anxiety disorders can be managed and overcome. It's important to recognize anxiety problems and treat them as soon as possible. For most people, effective therapy such as cognitive behaviour therapy is the first choice in treating anxiety disorders, because it helps people change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations. This can also prevent further problems.

**Most people need to seek professional help for anxiety – either from a family doctor, or a counsellor or psychologist to decide the best treatment option.**

It can also be helpful to learn some relaxation techniques. You will find some useful methods on the NZ Guidelines Group website, [www.nzgg.org.nz](http://www.nzgg.org.nz), in the Consumer Resources section, under Anxiety.

## Alcohol and Drug abuse

Depression is also linked to substance abuse – about one in eight New Zealanders with depression also have problems with drugs and alcohol. Some people 'self medicate' with drugs or alcohol to block out the effects of depression or anxiety. However this can make you feel worse.

### Alcohol and drugs can:

- Make your symptoms worse.
- Interfere with any medication you might be taking for your illness.
- Make your mental and/or physical health worse.
- Create other long term problems, such as addiction.

Research also shows that when people use drugs and alcohol in certain ways (such as binge drinking or using a lot of marijuana) they can increase their chances of getting depressed.

**Whether or not you are depressed, there are good reasons to be careful about the amount of alcohol you drink or drugs you take. For more information about how to manage alcohol and drug problems, see Fact Sheet 7 or visit [www.alac.org.nz](http://www.alac.org.nz), for information about alcohol, and [www.nzdf.org.nz](http://www.nzdf.org.nz) for information about drugs.**

## + getting help

**If you want to talk to a trained counsellor about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can**

- **Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757**
- **Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626**

They can listen to your story, and come up with ideas about what might help. They can also put you in touch with health professionals close to where you live, if that's what you want.

**Or for more information you can visit:**

**[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) or [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz)**

The Ministry of Health would like to acknowledge information sourced from: NZ Mental Health Survey 2006, NZ Guidelines Group, Royal Australian and NZ College of Psychiatrists, MaGPIe Research Group, Beyond Blue (Australia).

For more information and fact sheets visit  
**[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz)**