

Diagnosis and management of depression

(Index words: depression, antidepressants, continuing medical education, diagnosis, management)

Summary

Depression is a disabling illness which decreases quality of life and productivity. The point prevalence of major depression ranges from 5% to 9% among adults in primary care settings. Both pharmacological and psychological treatment are effective in treating depression.

Introduction

Depression is experienced by people with a variety of health problems. It should be differentiated from sadness, which is a normal response to loss. Depression can present as a symptom of some other illness such as dementia, parkinsonism, schizophrenia or substance use, or it can be considered as a syndrome – depressive disorder. In depressive disorder there is a prolonged lowering of mood accompanied by cognitive and behavioural changes.

Epidemiology

Major depressive disorder is estimated to be the fourth leading cause of loss measured by Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY), and ranks above ischaemic heart disease and cerebrovascular disease [1]. (The DALY

combines the time lived with disability and the time lost due to premature mortality).

The lifetime risk for major depressive disorder is 10-25% in women and 5-12% in men. It is significant that women are twice as likely as men to develop depression although the reasons for this difference are unclear.

Most depressed patients come to primary care settings and the point prevalence of major depression ranges from 5% to 10% among adults. Frequently patients with depression present with pain, non-specific musculoskeletal symptoms and medically unexplained symptoms. Many depressed patients have vague symptoms. In one study up to 70% of depressed patients reporting to a primary care physician gave only somatic symptoms [2]. Despite the high prevalence in primary care settings up to 50% of depressed patients go undiagnosed.

Clinical features

According to the ICD 10 (International Classification of Diseases) diagnostic guidelines, depressed mood, loss of interest and enjoyment, and increased fatigue are the most typical symptoms of depression. At least two of them together with at least two other symptoms listed in panel 1 should be present for at least 2 weeks for diagnosis.

Panel 1. ICD-10 guidelines for diagnosing a depressive episode

Typical symptoms

- Depressed mood
- Loss of interest and enjoyment of activities that are normally pleasurable
- Decreased energy or increased fatigue

Other symptoms

- Reduced concentration and attention
- Reduced self-esteem and self-confidence
- Ideas of guilt and unworthiness
- Bleak and pessimistic views of the future
- Ideas or acts of self-harm or suicide
- Disturbed sleep
- Diminished appetite

Mild depressive episode: at least 2 typical symptoms and 2 other symptoms

Moderate depressive episode: at least 2 typical symptoms and 3 (preferably 4) other symptoms

Severe depressive episode: all 3 typical symptoms and 4 other symptoms