Screening for Depression and Suicide Risk in Adults

People with depression often feel sad, hopeless, helpless, tired, and unmotivated.

What Is Depression?
It is normal for people to feel “depressed” at times as part of life. However, the term depression refers to when these feelings are strong and persistent and lead to problems in performing everyday tasks at home and at work. Untreated depression negatively affects one’s quality of life and is linked to other chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. Treatment for depression includes psychotherapy (talk therapy) and medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

Screening for Depression and Suicide Risk
The term screening means looking for a condition or illness in individuals who do not have specific symptoms or concerns related to that illness. Screening for depression and suicide risk is important because patients often do not feel comfortable bringing up depression symptoms with their doctor, especially during a routine checkup. It may only be when patients are specifically asked about these symptoms that the problem comes to light.

Patients can be screened for depression and suicide risk in a clinical setting using questionnaires. A commonly used screening questionnaire is the 9-Item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9). These 9 questions ask about

- Little interest or pleasure in doing things
- Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless
- Trouble falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Feeling tired or having little energy
- Poor appetite or overeating
- Feeling bad about yourself or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down
- Trouble concentrating, such as when reading or watching television
- Moving or speaking so slowly that other people have noticed, or being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving a lot more than usual
- Thoughts that you would be better off dead or thoughts of hurting yourself in some way

Pros and Cons of Screening for Depression and Suicide Risk
One might naturally presume that screening would be beneficial, but the reality is that sometimes looking for problems when there are no concerns or symptoms can be harmful. Therefore, it is important to carefully weigh the pros and cons of screening.

Pros of screening include earlier detection and treatment of depression and suicidal thoughts. For depression, studies provide fairly strong evidence that screening questionnaires can accurately identify a depressive disorder and that treatment can lead to improvement or remission of symptoms. For suicide risk, the evidence linking screening to decreased deaths by suicide is not as strong.

Cons of screening include false-positive results that may lead to unnecessary referrals, labeling, and stigma. While psychotherapy has little to no potential harm, the use of medications may have side effects.

Should You Be Screened for Depression and Suicide Risk?
The US Preventive Services Task Force recommends screening for depression in all adults aged 18 years or older, including pregnant and postpartum individuals. This recommendation does not include screening specifically for suicide risk because the evidence on this is still unclear.

US Preventive Services Task Force Recommendation
The USPSTF recommends screening for depression in adults, including pregnant and postpartum individuals. There is currently not enough evidence to say whether screening adults for suicide risk is beneficial.

Clinicians use a questionnaire to screen for depression. Patients with a positive screening should have a follow-up assessment to confirm the diagnosis of depression. Treatment of depression in adults includes

- Lifestyle changes such as increasing exercise, improving sleep habits, and addressing underlying health conditions
- Psychotherapy (talk therapy), including cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), and psychosocial counseling
- Antidepressant medication

Call the national suicide hotline at 988 if you or someone you know is thinking about suicide.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
US Preventive Services Task Force
www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/topic_search_results?topic_status=P

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