

Depression with psychotic symptoms

This information explains what depression with psychotic symptoms is, its symptoms and how it is treated. It is for people who are 18 or over and affected by mental illness in England. It is also for their loved ones and carers and anyone interested in this subject.

Key Points.

- Depression with psychotic symptoms is a mental illness. It is when you experience moderate or severe symptoms of depression but also symptoms of psychosis too.
- A number of risk factors might play a part in the development of depression with psychotic symptoms.
- A psychiatrist might diagnose depression with psychotic symptoms after a mental health assessment or assessments.
- Depression with psychotic symptoms is usually treated with medication, talking therapy, and social support.
- If you think you have depression with psychotic symptoms, there are options for support and treatment. This includes your local NHS early intervention in psychosis team and options for urgent help if you need it.
- There are options for your loved ones to get support for you.
- There are things you can do to help yourself.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What is depression with psychotic symptoms?](#)
2. [How common is depression with psychotic symptoms?](#)
3. [What causes depression with psychotic symptoms?](#)
4. [What are the symptoms of depression with psychotic symptoms?](#)
5. [How is depression with psychotic symptoms diagnosed?](#)
6. [How is depression with psychotic symptoms treated?](#)
7. [What can I do if I think I have depression with psychotic symptoms?](#)
8. [What can I do to help myself?](#)
9. [What if I am worried that a loved one has depression with psychotic symptoms?](#)

1. What is depression with psychotic symptoms?

Depression with psychotic symptoms is a mental illness. It is when you experience moderate¹ or severe symptoms of depression but also symptoms of psychosis too.²

Depression with psychotic symptoms is also known as psychotic depression.³

You will usually experience:⁴

- symptoms of psychosis, known as delusions and hallucinations, and
- many common symptoms of depression.

You might find the symptoms of depression with psychotic symptoms difficult to cope with. They might even lead to you having suicidal thoughts.⁵

If you need urgent help see our **Get help now** link at www.rethink.org. Or see [What can I do if I think I have depression with psychotic symptoms?](#) below.

You can find more information about:

- [Depression](#)
- [Psychosis](#)
- [Suicidal thoughts - How to cope](#)

at www.rethink.org. Or call us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheets.

What is the difference between depression with psychotic symptoms and schizophrenia?⁶

If you live with schizophrenia, you will experience symptoms of psychosis, usually including hallucinations and delusions. But schizophrenia is different from depression with psychotic symptoms.

If you live with depression with psychotic symptoms, you will experience other symptoms beyond hallucinations and delusions. These include depressed mood, fatigue, and suicidal ideation.

These depressive symptoms are usually absent in schizophrenia.

2. How common is depression with psychotic symptoms?

It is hard to find accurate figures for how many people experience depression with psychotic symptoms. But it appears to be less common than schizophrenia.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, schizophrenia affects around 1 in 100 people.⁷ The following study says depression with psychotic symptoms affects about 1 in 250 people:⁸ <https://bit.ly/4hgJabm>

Can new mothers experience depression with psychotic symptoms?

New mothers can experience depression with psychotic symptoms after the birth of their baby.⁹

If this happens to you while you are still in hospital, you should get the support you need from staff.

If you or your loved one get symptoms while you are at home see [What can I do if I think I have depression with psychotic symptoms?](#) below.

For more information see our page on [New parents, pregnancy, and mental health - Perinatal mental health](#) at www.rethink.org

[Top](#)

3. What causes depression with psychotic symptoms?

What can cause you to develop depression with psychotic symptoms can be complicated. Often, there might be no single cause.¹⁰

A number of risk factors might play a part in the development of depression with psychotic symptoms. These can include:^{11,12,13}

- Isolation, like living on your own, or not enough contact with loved ones
- Past abuse or neglect, maybe as a child
- A family history of mental illness
- Stressful things like, relationship issues, the death of a loved one, financial or health problems, or losing your job
- Having other mental health issues

You can find more information about:

- [Does mental illness run in families?](#)
- [Social inclusion and mental illness - How can I become more connected](#)
- [Stress - How to cope](#)

at www.rethink.org. Or call us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheets.

[Top](#)

4. What are the symptoms of depression with psychotic symptoms?

If you are experiencing psychosis, you will probably be out of touch with reality. If you are living with depression with psychotic symptoms, you will have moderate or severe symptoms of depression too.

You can find out more about the symptoms of psychosis and depression in our information on:

- [Depression](#)
- [Psychosis](#)

at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

But below is a short summary of the symptoms of depression and psychosis.

What are the symptoms of psychosis?

Psychosis is a term used to describe when a person interprets or perceives reality in a different way to those around them.

You might see or hear things that others do not. Or believe things other people do not.

Common symptoms of psychosis are:

- Hallucinations
- Delusions
- Cognitive impairments

What are hallucinations?

These are when you see, hear, smell, taste or feel things that other people do not. For example:

- hearing voices or sounds other people cannot, or
- seeing things which other people do not.

Hearing voices or other sounds is the most common type of hallucination.

What are delusions?

These are unusual beliefs that other people within your community do not share, even though they feel real to you.

For example, you may worry:

- that you are being followed by secret agents or members of the public, or
- that people are out to get you or trying to kill you. This can be strangers or people you know.

There are different types of delusions that people experience. Like, you may think you are a very powerful person or that you are god. These kinds of thoughts are called 'delusions of grandeur.'

What are cognitive impairments?

Cognitive impairments are ones that relate to mental action. Such as learning, remembering and functioning.

Some cognitive impairments associated with psychosis are:

- concentration problems,
- memory problems,
- difficulties in understanding new information, and
- difficulty making decisions.

What are the symptoms of depression?

Common symptoms of depression are:

- low mood, feeling sad, irritable, or angry
- having less energy to do certain things
- losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- reduced concentration
- becoming tired more easily
- disturbed sleep and losing your appetite
- loss of self-confidence
- feeling guilty or worthless
- weight loss
- thoughts and movements slowing down
- thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

[Top](#)

5. How is depression with psychotic symptoms diagnosed?

A psychiatrist might diagnose depression with psychotic symptoms after a mental health assessment.

You can read more about mental health assessments from the NHS here:
www.nhs.uk/mental-health/social-care-and-your-rights/mental-health-assessments

It might take more than one assessment for a psychiatrist to reach a diagnosis.

Psychiatrists will use the following manuals to help diagnose you:

- **International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11)** produced by the World Health Organisation (WHO)
- **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5)** produced by the American Psychiatric Association.

The manuals are guides which explain different mental health conditions and their symptoms. They also explain how long certain symptoms should last for before a diagnosis should be made.

To get a diagnosis of depression with psychotic symptoms, the psychiatrist must think that you have:

- symptoms of moderate or severe depression, and
- symptoms of psychosis, and
- had these over a period of time.

The criteria in ICD-11 and DSM-5 are slightly different.

DSM-5 is not online. But you can read the ICD-11 criteria here:
<https://icd.who.int/browse/2024-01/mms/en#419823765>

[Top](#)

6. How is depression with psychotic symptoms treated?

If you are diagnosed with depression with psychotic symptoms you will normally be offered:¹⁴

- **medication** - usually antidepressants and antipsychotics
- **talking therapy** – you might be offered cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or other forms of talking therapy
- **social support** – support with things like work, housing, or education

If your symptoms are really severe, treatment in hospital can help, before being discharged into the community.

You can find out more about treatments for psychosis and depression in our information on:

- [Depression](#)
- [Psychosis](#)

at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

You can find out more in our information on [Going into hospital for mental health treatment](#) at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

What is electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)?

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a treatment for some mental illnesses. You might be offered ECT if you are experiencing depression with psychotic symptoms and other treatments have not worked.¹⁵

ECT uses an electrical current which passes through your brain. The current causes a fit or seizure.

The NHS say that ECT is generally safe. It can cause some side-effects.

You can find out more in our information on [Electroconvulsive therapy \(ECT\)](#) at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

[Top](#)

7. What can I do if I think I have depression with psychotic symptoms?

If you think you have depression with psychotic symptoms you can:

- Contact your local NHS early intervention in psychosis team (EIT),
- See you GP,
- Contact the NHS on 111 or go to their website at: <https://111.nhs.uk>

If you need urgent help, see [What if I need urgent help?](#) below.

You can find out more in our information on [GPs and your mental health](#) at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

What are NHS early intervention in psychosis teams (EIT)?

NHS early intervention in psychosis teams (EIT) should support you if you experience psychosis for the first time.¹⁶

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) say that EIT services should be open to people of all ages.¹⁷ And you should start your treatment within 2 weeks of being referred.¹⁸

You can usually self-refer to your local EIT. This means that you can contact them and ask for help, without first seeing your GP or another medical professional. Usually your family or friends can refer you too.

You should be able to find your local EIT on the internet. You can use a use a search term like 'NHS early intervention psychosis team Leicestershire'. Or you can call NHS 111 and ask for contact details for your local team. Or you can ask your GP to refer you.

What if I need urgent help?

If you need urgent help **Contact NHS 111** for urgent mental health support. Or visit <https://111.nhs.uk/triage/check-your-mental-health-symptoms>.

You will need to answer some questions. They will refer you to an appropriate service or tell you what to do next.

For other urgent mental health support options, see our **Get help now** link at www.rethink.org.

You can find out more in our information on:

- [Self-harm](#)
- [Suicidal thoughts - How to cope](#)

at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

[Top](#)

8. What can I do to help myself?

Below are some ideas for self-care and management.

What are peer support and self-management programmes?

Peer support means that you get support from people who live with mental illness too.

- You can get peer support by joining a support group, or
- You may be able to get peer support and self-management programmes through your mental health team.

You can search for local support groups below:

- **Rethink Mental Illness:** www.rethink.org/help-in-your-area/support-groups
- **Local Minds:** www.mind.org.uk/about-us/local-minds

Peer support and self-management programmes might be able to give you information and advice about:

- how medication can be helpful,
- help you to notice and manage your symptoms,
- how to access mental health support,
- how to access other support services,
- how to cope with stress and other problems,
- what to do in a crisis,
- help you to build a social support network,
- help you to notice when you are becoming unwell, and
- help you to set personal recovery goals.

What are recovery colleges?

Recovery colleges are part of the NHS. They offer free mental health courses to help you manage your symptoms. They can help you to take control of your life and become an expert in your own wellbeing and recovery.¹⁹

You can usually self-refer to a recovery college.

Unfortunately, recovery colleges are not available in all areas. Search online to see if there is a recovery college in your area.

What is a wellness action plan (WAP)?

A WAP looks at things like how you are affected by your illness. And what you could do to manage your symptoms.

There are guides that can help with this. You can ask your healthcare professional to make one with you. Or ask them for a template.

You can read more about wellness action plans here: <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/blog/wellbeing-workplan>.

You can see an example of a wellness action plan here: <https://mhukcdn.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/26122110/MHUK-My-Wellbeing-plan.pdf>.

How can I manage voices I hear?

Is it important to some people who live with psychosis to manage the voices they hear with alternative methods to medication.

These resources might help, including one for carers:

Eleanor Longden – The voices in my head

This video tells Eleanor's story about the voices she hears. She talks about her journey back to better mental health. She makes the case that by learning to listen to her voices she was able to survive.

Website: www.ted.com/talks/eleanor_longden_the.voices_in_my_head

The BBC – Why do people hear voices in their heads?

This BBC radio programme looks at what causes people to hear voices. You can listen to it online or download it.

Website: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csvtc3

Understanding Voices

A website produced by Durham University together with mental health professionals, voice-hearers and their families. The website aims to make it easier for people to find information about different approaches to voice-hearing. It includes ways of supporting those who have challenges with the voices they hear.

Website: <https://understandingvoices.com>

Me and My Mind

A website produced by the South London and Maudsley (SLaM) NHS Foundation Trust. The service is for young people in the SLaM area. But there is lots of useful information on the website and resources you can download.

Website: www.meandmymind.nhs.uk

Avatar Therapy

Researchers have been looking into how computer-based treatment may help with hearing voices.²⁰ This treatment is known as avatar therapy. Avatar therapy is not available on the NHS currently.

In this therapy you create a computer-generated face with a voice which is like a voice you hear. This is called an ‘avatar’. You work with a therapist to talk to the avatar and gain more control over the voice you hear.

Results show that this therapy is helpful for some people. But there is more research taking place.

Avatar Therapy UCL webpage: www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/project/avtherapy

Caring for someone with psychosis or schizophrenia

This is a free, online course provided by Kings College in London. It is aimed at people who care for people who live with psychosis or schizophrenia.

Website: www.futurelearn.com/courses/caring-psychosis-schizophrenia

NHS self-help guide - Hearing voices and disturbing beliefs

This booklet is for people who experience voices or disturbing beliefs. It has been produced by a group who have personal experience of hearing voices and disturbing beliefs. It includes information as well as space to write in your own experiences.

Website: <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp>

Are there any self-help guides for depression and low mood?

Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust

This NHS trust has produced a self-help guide for Depression and low mood.

Website: <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

What about other self-help?

There are things that you can do to help yourself to try to reduce the effect of the symptoms of depression with psychotic symptoms.

Everyone is different, so you can find out what works for you.

You can:

- **Eat healthy foods and have a balanced diet.** You can get more information here: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well
- **Keep physically active:** See [Physical activity and mental health](http://www.rethink.org) at www.rethink.org
- **Choose healthier drinks and make sure you are hydrated.** You can get more information here: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/water-drinks-nutrition
- **Have enough sleep.** See [How can I improve my sleep?](http://www.rethink.org) at www.rethink.org
- **Avoid alcohol, drinking only moderately or cutting down.** See [Drugs, alcohol and mental health](http://www.rethink.org) at www.rethink.org
- **Avoid smoking or cutting down.** See [Smoking and mental health](http://www.rethink.org) at www.rethink.org

You can read more about how physical health and lifestyle changes below:

- **Wellbeing and physical health.** See www.rethink.org
- **Physical and mental health.** Look at 'lifestyle factors.' www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/physical-health-and-mental-health

[Top](#)

9. What if I am worried that a loved one has depression with psychotic symptoms?

You can encourage your loved one to contact their local NHS early intervention in psychosis team (EIT) or GP. Or you can contact them yourself.

For more information on EITs see '**What can I do if I think I have depression with psychotic symptoms?**' then '[What are NHS early intervention in psychosis teams \(EIT\)?](#)'

If your love one is experiencing psychosis they might not be aware that they are behaving in a way others might think is unusual. This is often called 'lacking insight.' So, sometimes they might not want to reach out for help.

If you think your loved one needs urgent help with their mental health, you can get more advice in our information on [Getting help for someone in a mental health crisis](#) at www.rethink.org. Or call us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

You can get more information on:

- [Suicidal thoughts - How to support someone](#)
- [Supporting someone with a mental illness](#)
- [Worried about someone's mental health?](#)

at www.rethink.org. Or call us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Useful Contacts

Mood Swings Network

This service provides a range of services for people affected by a mood disorder such as depression, including their family and friends.

Phone: 0161 832 3736

Address: 36 New Mount Street, Manchester, M4 4DE

Email: info@moodswings.org.uk

Website: www.moodswings.org.uk

The Hearing Voices Network

This service gives support and understanding for those who hear voices or experience other types of hallucination.

Address: 86-90 Paul Street London EC2A 4NE

Email: info@hearing-voices.org

Website: www.hearing-voices.org

Intervoice

Intervoice are a charity. They encourage people all over the world to share ideas through their online community. You can also find information about hearing voices through their articles and resources.

Email: info@intervoiceonline.org

Website: www.intervoiceonline.org

References

¹ World Health Organisation. *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 11th Revision*. 6A71.2 Recurrent depressive disorder, current episode moderate, with psychotic symptoms. See 'Description' <https://icd.who.int/browse/2024-01/mms/en#419823765> (Accessed 14 January 2024)

² NHS. *Psychotic depression*. See first paragraph. www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/psychotic-depression/?form=MG0AV3 (accessed 15 January 2025)

³ NHS. *Psychotic depression*. www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/psychotic-depression/?form=MG0AV3 (accessed 15 January 2025)

⁴ Priory Group. *Psychotic depression: causes, symptoms and treatment*
See 'What is psychotic depression?' See first paragraph. <https://www.priorygroup.com/mental-health/depression-treatment/psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

⁵ Priory Group. *Psychotic depression: causes, symptoms and treatment*
See 'What is psychotic depression?' See first paragraph. <https://www.priorygroup.com/mental-health/depression-treatment/psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

⁶ MentalHealth.Com. *Psychotic Depression – What is it?* See 'What is the difference between psychotic depression and schizophrenia?' <https://www.mentalhealth.com/library/what-is-psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

⁷ Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Schizophrenia – How common is schizophrenia* www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyouthinfo/parentscarers/schizophrenia.aspx (accessed 14 January 2025).

⁸ Ohayon MM, Schatzberg AF. Prevalence of depressive episodes with psychotic features in the general population. *Am J Psychiatry*. 2002 Nov;159(11):1855-61. doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.159.11.1855. PMID: 12411219. See 'Conclusions' (says, 'Major depressive episodes with psychotic features are relatively frequent in the general population, affecting four of 1,000 individuals')
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12411219/#:~:text=The%20current%20prevalence%20of%20major,in%20women%20than%20in%20men> (accessed 15.01.25)

⁹ Priory Group. *Psychotic depression: causes, symptoms and treatment*
See 'Psychotic depression symptoms' See last paragraph. <https://www.priorygroup.com/mental-health/depression-treatment/psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹⁰ Priory Group. *Psychotic depression: causes, symptoms and treatment*
See 'What causes psychotic depression?' See first paragraph.
<https://www.priorygroup.com/mental-health/depression-treatment/psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹¹ MentalHealth.Com. *Psychotic Depression – What is it?* See 'Causes of psychotic depression'
<https://www.mentalhealth.com/library/what-is-psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹² Priory Group. *Psychotic depression: causes, symptoms and treatment*
See 'What causes psychotic depression?' See first paragraph.
<https://www.priorygroup.com/mental-health/depression-treatment/psychotic-depression> (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹³ NHS. *Psychotic depression*. See first paragraph. www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/psychotic-depression/?form=MG0AV3 (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹⁴ NHS. *Psychotic depression*. See 'Treating psychotic depression' www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/psychotic-depression/?form=MG0AV3 (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹⁵ Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) - What is ECT and why is it used?* www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/treatments-and-wellbeing/ect (accessed 15 January 2025)

¹⁶ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. *Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults: prevention and management*. Clinical Guidance 178. London: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence; 2014. Para 1.3.1.1
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg178/chapter/Recommendations#first-episode-psychosis> (accessed 14 January 2025)

¹⁷ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. *Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults: treatment and management*. Clinical Guidance 178. London: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence; 2014. Para 1.3.1.1
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg178/chapter/Recommendations#first-episode-psychosis> (accessed 14 January 2025)

¹⁸ National Institute of Health and Care Excellence. *Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults quality standard [QS80]*. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence; 2015 Statement 1. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs80/chapter/Quality-statement-1-Referral-to-early-intervention-in-psychosis-services> (accessed 14 January 2025)

¹⁹ South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. *What is a recovery college?*

www.barnsleyrecoverycollege.nhs.uk/what-is-a-recovery-college/ (accessed 14 January 2025)

²⁰ Leff, J et al. *Computer-assisted therapy for medication-resistant auditory hallucinations: proof-of-concept study*. The British Journal of Psychiatry. Jun 2013; 202(6): pp 428-433.

This factsheet is available in large print

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525

**Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm -
excluding bank holidays**

Webchat service available

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you or if you found any issues with it

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

Write to us for advice at:

Rethink Advice & Information Service,
28 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7GR

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays. Find out more about the service here: www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-our-advice-service/contacting-the-advice-service



Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on Mental health conditions and symptoms, treatment and support, physical health and wellbeing, BAME mental health, LGBT+ mental health, mental health laws and rights, work, studying, and mental health, police, courts, and prison, and advice for carers.

Do not have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Do you have accessibility tools for this information?

You can find this information on our website at www.rethink.org. There is an accessibility function on this webpage called **Recite**. On the desktop site, click on the icon in the top right-hand corner next to 'Donate.'

On the mobile site, scroll right and click on the 'Turn on accessibility' icon.

Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to rethink.org/donate or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.

