

Research Evidence for Alternative Treatments for Depression



Major depression disorder (MDD) includes one or more of the following symptoms for two weeks or more:

- Feeling persistently hopeless, negative, empty, worthless, or guilty
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Low energy or feeling tired all the time
- Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Extreme changes in appetite or weight
- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Restlessness or anxiety

Encourage your patients to call 988 to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline after hours.

The Military Health System offers highly effective treatments for depression. When treating uncomplicated MDD, the 2022 Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense clinical practice guidelines (CPG) for MDD state, “We recommend that MDD be treated with either psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy as monotherapy, based on patient preference... when choosing psychotherapy to treat MDD, we suggest offering one of the following interventions (not rank ordered): Acceptance and commitment therapy, behavioral therapy/behavioral activation, cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, problem-solving therapy, short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy.” (p.33) The 2022 MDD CPG is based on published clinical evidence available through January 31, 2021. Despite having these effective interventions, many patients and providers have questions about other depression treatments. It is important to know if there is sufficient [research evidence](#) to support these alternative or adjunct depression treatments to accompany evidence-based treatment as outlined in the CPG. This resource lists many alternative depression treatments and summarizes the research evidence as of December 2020. Some of the treatments are based on interventions identified in the CPG. A summary of antidepressant medication and psychotherapy interventions from the CPG is covered in other resources.

Treatment	Description	Research Evidence
Exercise (e.g., yoga, tai chi, qi gong, resistance, aerobics)	A potential add-on to pharmacological treatment of depression, as well as an option for patients unresponsive to antidepressant medications or who experience adverse side effects	Recommended (weak for). Some evidence suggests benefits of exercise in addition to other treatments, or for patients unwilling or unable to engage in psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy. The Evidence Brief recommends exercise as an adjunct treatment for MDD with a “weak for” strength.
Light therapy (also bright light therapy or phototherapy)	Proposed as a treatment for MDD with a seasonal or non-seasonal pattern that involves exposure to artificial bright light at a prescribed brightness level and duration of time	Recommended (weak for). The Evidence Brief recommends light therapy with a “weak for” strength for adult patients with mild-to-moderate MDD with or without a seasonal pattern.
Repetitive-transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS)	Involves placing a coil on the scalp over the brain region of interest and magnetic pulses pass through the skull and create small electrical currents that stimulate nearby neurons	Recommended (weak for). The Evidence Brief recommends rTMS with a “weak for” strength for patients with treatment-resistant MDD.
St. John’s wort (SJW)	Plant used for its antidepressant properties	Recommended (weak for). The Evidence Brief recommends using a standardized extract of SJW as a monotherapy with a “weak for” strength for patients with mild MDD. The Evidence Brief cautions <i>against</i> using SJW for moderate-to-severe MDD, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, or in combination with another antidepressant.
Botulinum toxin (BTX)	BTX is injected between the eyebrows (Glabellar injection) and is being investigated in the treatment of depression	Insufficient evidence. There is not enough evidence to recommend use or caution against use.

Treatment	Description	Research Evidence
Cranial electrotherapy stimulation (CES)	Non-invasive, prescribed treatment for depression involving the self-application of electrical magnetic fields to the scalp	Insufficient evidence. There is not enough evidence to recommend use or caution against use.
Vagus nerve stimulation (VNS)	Involves an invasive procedure where a pulse generator is implanted below the skin in the patient's chest, which connects to electrodes on the left vagus nerve in the neck	Not recommended. The Evidence Brief strongly recommends <i>against</i> VNS for MDD (including severe treatment-resistant depression) based on a lack of evidence, safety concerns, and costs.

“Weak for” strength of recommendation: The intervention is suggested, but there is less confidence that benefits outweigh potential harms.

Insufficient evidence: Evidence that the intervention is effective is lacking, poor quality, or conflicting, and the balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

Disclaimer: No one treatment is right for everyone. Consult your provider about other medications and treatment options to determine which treatment is best for you based on the benefits, risks, and side effects of each treatment.

Resources



Military OneSource provides 24/7 support and information on housing, financial, legal, medical and psychological services state side at 800-342-9647, overseas at 800-3429-6477, or collect at 484-530-5908.
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil>



Military/Veterans Crisis Line provides free, confidential support for service members and veterans in crisis. Dial 988, then press 1 to chat live with a counselor.
veteranscrisisline.net



MoodHacker resilience tool lets you track, understand and improve how you're feeling. Your mood affects how satisfied you are with your life as well as your relationships with other people. Rate your mood, track your progress toward an improved mood, and use evidence-based techniques to improve how you feel with MoodHacker.
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/confidential-help/interactive-tools-services/resilience-tools/improve-your-mood-with-moodhacker/>



Real Warriors provides information and testimonies to share personal experiences which encourage service members and veterans to seek professional help quickly when it will have the greatest impact.
<https://www.Health.mil/RealWarriors>

Mobile Apps



Mindfulness Coach
 Can be used to learn mindful techniques which have been shown to be effective in reducing stress, improving depression and emotional balance.
<https://www.mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach>



Virtual Hope Box
 Contains simple tools to help users with coping, relaxation, distraction and positive thinking using personalized audio, video, pictures, games, mindfulness exercises, activity planning, inspirational quotes and coping statements.
onemindpsyberguide.org/apps/virtual-hope-box-review/

References:

All information on research evidence listed above was obtained from Psychological Health Center of Excellence Psych Health Evidence Briefs for major depressive disorder. These briefs can be found at <https://www.health.mil/ResearchAnalytics>.

All information on research evidence listed above was obtained from the [2022 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder](#).



Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense health care providers who use this information are responsible for considering all applicable regulations and policies throughout the course of care and patient education. Updated August 2022 by the Psychological Health Center of Excellence.