At any time in Ireland there are over 450,000 people suffering with depression. That’s one in ten of us\(^1\). Depression can affect anyone, irrespective of gender, age and personal background\(^1\).

With the holiday festivities over, we say goodbye to food and fun with family and friends and get back to everyday reality. For many people, January can be a difficult time, as they come to terms with financial debts, festive weight-gain and the return to work…and all of this set against a background of a bleak mid-winter!

Luckily for most people, the January blues usually resolve by themselves. For others, serious mental health issues like depression and anxiety are chronic conditions that have a major impact on life throughout the year.

This month we focus on the symptoms of depression and offer practical tips for better mental health for all of your patients, including exercise and diet.

**Get moving for a better mood!**

Regular exercise reduces stress and anxiety and can really give our mood a boost. Taking regular exercise may ease depression in a number of ways because it:

1. **Releases feel-good brain chemicals** that may ease depression (e.g. certain neurotransmitters, endorphins and endocannabinoids)
2. **Reduces immune system chemicals** that can worsen depression
3. **Increases body temperature**, which can bring on calming effects

Exercise doesn’t have to involve joining a gym or going for a long-distance run. Even simple changes like taking a 15 minute walk at lunchtime can have a positive effect.

We all know that diet and exercise have a profound effect on our physical health but a growing body of research is now showing the positive impact they can have on our mental health too.

**EATING FOR A HEALTHY MIND**

**OMEGA-3 FATTTY ACIDS**

Omega-3 fatty acids appear to be beneficial for cognitive (brain memory and performance) and behavioural function.¹

**Sources:** Oily fish like sardines, salmon, trout and mackerel

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**FOLATE (Folic Acid, Vitamin B9)**

A Finnish study found that intake of folate was associated with a lower risk of depression.²

**Sources:** Leafy green vegetables, fruits, berries, wholegrains, meat and liver

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**VITAMIN D**

The dreary Irish winter can leave people lacking in vitamin D, a nutrient that has been shown to have a protective effect against depression.³

**Sources**
- Oily fish like sardines, salmon, trout and mackerel
- Foods fortified with vitamin D, eg. milk, cereals
- Cheese
- Egg yolks
- Some people may find it helpful to take vitamin D supplements during autumn and winter months

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References:
Patients who are exhibiting symptoms of depression should always be evaluated by their GP. As well as medication, counselling and psychotherapy, there are many lifestyle changes that may benefit the patient.

One useful way to help recognise depression is to use an acronym called **FESTIVAL**. This is a list of common symptoms. **If five or more of these symptoms are present in your patient for more than two weeks, it is likely that the person is experiencing a depressive episode.** The FESTIVAL symptoms are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong>EELING</td>
<td>Depressed, sad, anxious or bored.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong>NERGY</td>
<td>Tiredness, fatigue, everything seems an effort, slowed movements.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>S</strong>LEEP</td>
<td>Waking during the night or too early in the morning. Oversleeping or trouble getting to sleep.</td>
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<td><strong>T</strong>HINKING</td>
<td>Slow thinking, poor concentration, forgetful or indecisive.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>I</strong>NTEREST</td>
<td>Loss of interest in food, work, sex and life generally.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>V</strong>ALE</td>
<td>Reduced sense of self-worth, low self-esteem or guilt.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong>CHES</td>
<td>Headaches, chest or other pains or palpitations without a physical basis.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong>IVE</td>
<td>Not wanting to live, suicidal thoughts or thinking of death.</td>
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