

# EASY Guide to Depression

A publication of the Hepatitis C Support Project ●

**Alan Franciscus**  
*Executive Director*  
*Editor-in-Chief,*  
*HCSP Publications*

**Author**  
**Alan Franciscus**

**Editor**  
**C.D. Mazoff, PhD**

**Design and Production**  
**Leslie Hoex**

**Webmaster**  
**C.D. Mazoff, PhD**

**Contact Information**  
**Hepatitis C Support Project**  
**PO Box 427037**  
**San Francisco, CA 94142-7037**  
**alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org**



**HCV ADVOCATE**  
**www.hcvadvocate.org**

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# Foreword

When you find out that you have hepatitis C many thoughts run through your mind. Some people get confused, angry and depressed. These are normal feelings, but if depression is left unchecked it can lead to many severe problems. The medications to treat hepatitis C—pegylated interferon and ribavirin—can also make you feel angry and depressed. This is also normal. But, again, if ignored it can lead to many serious medical problems that may affect how well treatment works.

This guide is about depression and hepatitis C—what the symptoms are and what steps you can take to help with depression. Some people may be ashamed to have a condition like depression; but remember that depression is a medical condition that is treatable.

Treatment of depression can include some or all of the following strategies:

- Support from family and friends
- Professional help from counselors, therapists and psychiatrists
- Exercise
- Stress reduction
- Healthy diet
- Many different kinds of medications called antidepressants

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received is that you don't have to go it alone. I would add to this important advice—you should never go at it alone, especially when someone is suffering with depression.

*Alan Francisus*

- It is estimated that 26% of Americans over the age of 18 suffer from some form of mental disorder—that's 1 in 4 adults. If you use the population of the United States from the 2004 Census that would be almost 58 million Americans
- Depression is a treatable illness

## DEPRESSION



## FACTS

- People with hepatitis C are more likely to be depressed
- According to the World Health Association, depression affects some 121 million people worldwide ■

# What is Depression?

Depression is a mental illness—it is a very serious illness that can be life threatening. A simple definition of depression is “an illness that affects the moods and actions of a person.” Everyone gets the “blues” or has down moments, but depression is much more serious.

Depression can have a real impact on your feelings and general outlook on life. Feeling sad a lot, feeling like you’re living in a “black hole,” where nothing in life is interesting, feeling hopeless, and having a negative spin on everything are common warning signs of depression.

Even physical things like headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain can be caused by depression.

## HCV and Depression

Being diagnosed with hepatitis C (hep C or HCV for short) can certainly make you feel blue, angry and depressed—this is normal. If you have feelings that last for any length of time then it’s time to get some professional help. The drugs used to treat hepatitis C can also cause depression. For this reason many patients are started on anti-depressant medications (before or during treatment) to lower the chances that they will

get depressed. There are other medicines people can take to help with feeling anxious.

### **IMPORTANT!**

If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others —**this is an emergency that needs to be taken care of right away.** Call your doctor or nurse or one of the phone numbers listed at the end of this guide. People who work at crisis hotlines have been trained to help people who are in crisis mode.

There are other feelings that

people might have while on HCV treatment such as feeling too happy or “high” for a period of time and too low or depressed for a period of time—this is called mania. There are medicines that can help with this also. Your doctor or nurse should talk with you about these types of problems and they may give you medications before you start treatment or they may just watch and wait to see if any of these symptoms occur while on treatment. ■

# Symptoms of Depression

The symptoms of depression are different for everyone. The following list is from a brochure produced by the National Institutes of Mental Health's, *Depression*.

## **Symptoms of Depression include:**

- Feeling sad, anxious, or an “empty” feeling
- Crying spells with no real explanation
- Feeling hopeless or pessimistic (gloomy or negative symptoms)
- Feeling guilty a lot
- Feeling like you are worthless
- Feeling helpless about life in general
- Not interested in family or social events, hobbies, sex, or being with friends
- Constantly tired all the time
- Cannot concentrate or make decisions
- Trouble with memory
- Having problems sleeping at night
- Not eating, losing weight
- Eating too much—gaining a lot of weight
- Thinking about killing yourself, planning on killing yourself

## **Mania (mood swings from severe lows to severe highs) symptoms include:**

- Being overly excited without a reason
- Being really mad and cranky without a reason
- Feeling like you do not want to sleep very much—staying up when you usually sleep
- Talking a lot more than usual
- Your mind can't seem to land on one thought—thinking about everything at once
- Wanting to have sex all the time
- A lot more energy than usual
- Making bad decisions that you would not normally make
- Acting out or doing things that are not acceptable when in public or with friends



# Getting Help for Depression

There are a lot of things that people can do to help with their depression. A lot depends on how severe the depression is.

Mild depression can be helped by getting help from others and taking self-care steps to help you feel better. Here are some simple tips to help with feeling down:

- **Getting information**

- Try to research hepatitis C and the treatment. Many times what you may hear from others isn't the whole story. For instance, for most people who are told they have hepatitis C it doesn't mean that they will die right away or even that they will die from Hep C. Hepatitis C is a very serious illness, but most people have time to find out more and take charge of their health and will not die of hepatitis C. Many people also are very afraid of treatment because they have heard horror stories about how difficult it is. The reality is that, yes, it is a difficult treatment, but the vast majority of people can get through therapy if given support from their family, friends, doctors, nurses and others living with hepatitis C.

- **Getting Support**

- Ask for help from family, friends, and your medical team. At first only tell those people who you are close to and people who you are sure will provide the support that you need. Once you have support from the most important people in your life then reach out to others who may might be able to give you support.
- A word of caution—be careful about telling people you work with because you don't know how they will handle it. It could make your life at work miserable if it gets around that you have hepatitis C or you can even lose your job. See our *A Guide to HCV Disclosure* for information about whether or not to disclose to your employer.
- One proven way to get support is by attending a hepatitis C support group in your area or by joining an internet group. There is a list of internet support resources that we recommend at the end of this guide.

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## Getting Help for Depression

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- **Exercise**

- Exercise is very important to stay healthy and it just might help with a case of the blues or mild depression. Talk with your doctor and nurse and ask if it is ok for you to exercise. You can get some really good ideas from your doctor and nurse or friends about different types of exercise. In fact, it would be helpful if you and a friend agreed to exercise together. Walking is one of the best forms of exercise—it is easy to do and most anyone can take up walking. Walking with a friend can make the time go by fast and will help to keep both of you (or more people) stick to an exercise plan.

- **Balance**

- Try to make sure that if you do something like exercise or running errands that you balance it with rest. For example, if you go for a walk, make sure you build some time in afterwards for some rest so you can restore your energy. If you have certain chores that have to be done, do them when you find that you have the most energy—for some people this is in the morning, for others it might be in the evening. Listen to what your body tells you and learn to adapt yourself to the situation and how you are feeling at the moment.

- **Sleep**

- Getting the right amount of sleep can be one of the most important steps you can take to stay healthy and upbeat. Most people need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep every night. If you are having problems sleeping check in with your doctor or nurse. There are many things you can do to help you sleep better, such as avoiding food and exercise too close to bedtime, and there are certain medications that can help you sleep—these include medicines that your doctor or nurse will prescribe or medicines you can get at the local drugstore.

- **Keeping a positive attitude**

- It is a lot easier said than done, but it is well-known that people who think positive thoughts are generally happier people. Thoughts of gloom and doom are likely to make you feel sad and down. Try simple things like telling yourself that even though you are feeling very tired now

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## Getting Help for Depression

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you will feel better when this time passes. Don't get caught up in thinking that you will feel this way all the time. It's good to have a "real" picture of your health, but you don't want let your negative feelings drag you down and make you miserable.

- **Stress can make you sick!**

- Try to get rid of any stress that is in your life that you can control and learn about ways to help you to reduce your stress level. There are many things you can try such as yoga, meditating, prayer and other things that can help to reduce your stress level. Find time to have fun—laugh and do things that you like to do, hang out with friends and try to make sure you do "fun" things on a regular basis.

- **Certain substances can make you feel depressed**

- Alcohol, drugs, tobacco and other things can affect how you feel. If you can't stop ask for help. Talk with your doctor or nurse about anything you are taking that might be making you feel depressed.

- **Eating well is another way to stay healthy and to keep your mood upbeat.**

- A healthy diet includes a lot of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean meat—try to stay away from too much sugar and foods that have a lot of fat. If possible talk with a person who can give you information about food and nutrition— such as a registered dietician.

- **For More Serious Mental Illness**

- For more serious symptoms of depression or other mental illnesses a person who has been trained and schooled in treating depression can help. The medical person that has the "special skills" and education required to work in this area is called a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist can prescribe medication to take that can help with depression. There are other types of professionals that also help with depression, such as psychologists and therapists who have one-on-one sessions, as well as others who run group therapy sessions, counselors, licensed social workers and other professionals who can help with problems.

## What about Medicines to Treat Depression?

There are a lot of medicines that are used to treat depression and other mental problems. Talk with your doctor or psychiatrist to figure out if you need to take these medications.

The drugs used to treat depression are called antidepressants. These medications don't work the same for everyone so you may have to take different ones to find out which antidepressant works best for you. Work closely with your doctor and don't give up because most people can be helped with medication.

Medicines to treat depression can have side effects depending on how the body reacts to them. The most common side effects of antidepressants include:

- Headaches,

- Stomach aches or feeling sick to the stomach,
- Being nervous, feeling jittery and
- Certain sexual problems. The sexual problems can affect men and women, but the thing to remember is that they go away after stopping the antidepressant medication. For most people the side effects will get better over time. There are also medications to help with some of the side effects of the antidepressant.

It is important to remember that all drugs have to be processed by the liver so your doctor or nurse may monitor the antidepressant to make sure it is working for you and that your liver is able to handle the medication.

## WHAT ABOUT HERBS?



There are some herbs that people use to treat depression. But it is really important to know that herbs have not been found to help with a major bout of depression, although some herbs like St. John's Wort might help with mild depression. *But always make sure your doctor knows of any herbs you are taking.* That's because herbs are like regular medicines and they can affect how well other medicines work. Also, some herbs can make you sick and damage the liver. If you are interested in taking herbs use a well-known herbalist and remember to always tell your doctor or nurse about *everything* you are taking even if you think you will be judged—keeping you safe and healthy should always be your number one priority. If you feel your doctor or nurse will judge you, talk with him or her about this.

# Conclusion

Depression can hit anyone. People with hepatitis C seem to get more depression than people who don't have hepatitis C. If you are feeling down, blue, depressed or having any other mental problems, don't feel ashamed. Work closely with your medical team to manage and treat it. It is especially important to get it treated early before it gets worse.

## Resources

### Mental Health:

Ask your doctor for a referral to a mental health provider. Your local county mental health association may have recommendations. If you have a religious affiliation, ask for suggestions. Some places of employment provide counselling services.

- *National Mental Health Association*  
800-969-NMHA (6642)  
[www.depression-screening.org](http://www.depression-screening.org)
- *National Institute of Mental Health Depression Information*  
[www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm)
- *National Mental Health Information Center*  
800-789-2647  
[mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)

### SLEEP:

- *National Sleep Foundation*  
202-347-3471  
[www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)

### SUBSTANCE USE:

- *Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)*  
[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)  
To find an AA group near you, look for "Alcoholics Anonymous" in any telephone directory or contact AA World Services, P.O. Box 459, New York, NY 10163; 212-870-3400.

- *Narcotic Anonymous (NA)*  
[www.na.org](http://www.na.org)  
To find an NA group near you, look in your local telephone directory or contact NA World Services, P.O. Box 9999, Van Nuys, CA 91409; 818-773-9999.
- *National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)* 800-729-6686  
[www.health.org](http://www.health.org)

### SMOKING CESSATION:

- *American Cancer Society*  
800-227-2345  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- *American Lung Association*  
212-315-8700  
[www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)
- *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*  
[www.cdc.gov/tobacco/how2quit.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/how2quit.htm)
- *National Cancer Institute (NCI)*  
Information specialists are available to answer smoking-related questions in English or Spanish, Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. local time. Call toll free in the U.S., 1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848)  
[www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/tobacco/quitting-and-prevention](http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/tobacco/quitting-and-prevention)

### HEPATITIS C INFORMATION:

- *Hepatitis C Support Project*  
[www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org)
- *American Liver Foundation*  
800-465-4837  
[www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)
- *Hepatitis Foundation International*  
800-891-0707  
[www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)
- *Hep C Connection*  
800-522-4372  
[www.hepc-connection.org](http://www.hepc-connection.org)
- *HepCBC*  
[www.hepcbc.ca](http://www.hepcbc.ca)

### SUPPORT GROUPS:

To find a hepatitis C, chronic illness, or depression support group in your area, ask your doctor, search the Internet, or contact an HCV advocacy group.

The Hepatitis C Support Project can provide information about hepatitis C support groups in many areas.

The content of this guide is adapted from *Coping with Depression and Hepatitis C*, by Lucinda K. Porter, RN and Eric Dieperink, MD

# Easy C Facts

## Easy C Facts

100 People

African Americans & HCV

Alcohol and HCV

Antibody Test

Biopsy

Diet

Feeling Tired

Gay Men, Sex & HCV

Genotype

Get Healthy

HBV-HCV Coinfection

Herbs

HIV-HCV Coinfection

Hygiene Items

Immune System

Liver

Medication Guide

Methadone

Mother-to-Child

Natural & Alternative

Medicine

Needle Exchange

New Hep C Medicines

Piercing

Prevention

Ribavirin Warning

Sex and Hep C

Sleep

Steatosis

Tattoos

Treatment

Vibrio

Viral Load

What is ALT?

What is Cirrhosis?

What is Hepatitis C?

Whom Should I Tell?

