

a series of fact sheets written  
by experts in the field of liver  
disease

# *HCV and Mental Health: Managing Depression*

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*Depression is the most common serious psychiatric illness. It is also one of the most treatable. Depression is a disorder that may affect our feelings and outlook on life. Persistent feelings of sadness, a loss of interest in life, hopelessness, and pessimism are common warning signs of depression. The symptoms can vary among people. All of us can feel blue from time to time. However, a persistent or unexplained bout of the “blues” is not normal and should be evaluated.*

## ***What can be done about Depression?***

Help for depression can come in a variety of ways. Sometimes mild depression can be improved with self-help measures alone. Prolonged or severe depression usually requires professional treatment. Sometimes professional intervention and self-help measures can reinforce each other.

## ***Professional Help***

If you think you are depressed, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to prescribe medication for you or suggest you see a specialist. The specialist may be a psychiatrist, which is medical doctor. Sometimes psychotherapy is rec-

ommended. Psychotherapy uses counseling tools to treat depression and other mental illnesses. Although some psychiatrists offer psychotherapy, patients are often referred to non-medical mental health professionals for this treatment. These can include psychologists, marriage and family counselors, licensed social workers or nurse specialists. These specialists are trained to help you talk about yourself and to find ways to manage your depression. Psychotherapy can be done individually or in a group. There are many types of psychotherapy and approaches vary widely. Shop around to find a therapist and style that suits you.

***Important Note: If you have thoughts of suicide or hurting yourself or others, seek immediate professional help.***

## ***Medication***

Antidepressant medications are often used to treat depression. There are many different types of medications. Antidepressants can cause side effects, which are usually mild. However, some side effects can be serious and those that are unusual, annoying or affect your activities should be reported to your doctor right away. Common side effects of antidepressants may include drowsiness, headaches, nausea, feeling agitated or jittery, and sexual problems. Sometimes a drug's side effects can actually work in a positive way. For instance, if you have insomnia, a slightly sedating antidepressant may help you sleep.

***Important Note: Avoid alcohol, since it can worsen depression and may interact with antidepressants and reduce their effectiveness.***

## ***What to Expect During Antidepressant Therapy***

Antidepressants often take some time before they are effective. Some people may notice improvement in a week or two, but typically antidepressant medications must be taken regularly for six to eight weeks before their full effect is felt. If you miss a dose of medication, take the next regularly scheduled dose – do not “double up” as this may cause increased side effects. Never stop a medication without talking to your doctor.

All medications can cause allergic reactions. Tell your doctor about any allergies you might have. Antidepressants can interact with certain drugs or other conditions. Inform your doctor about any over-the-counter or prescription medica-

tions, non-prescribed drugs, or dietary supplements you are using. These may affect how the antidepressant works. Finally, notify your doctor if you experience any unusual or worsening symptoms.

Although antidepressants are often helpful and can significantly improve your symptoms and quality of life, treatment should be individualized. Studies have shown that the best results occur when antidepressants are used in conjunction with psychotherapy. Discuss options with your healthcare provider to find the best treatment for you.

### *Self-Help*

The mind and the body are not separate or independent from each other. Your body affects your mind and your mind affects your body. Stress can weaken the immune system and make it harder to resist diseases. Feeling unwell can lead to increased fatigue and more depression. Breaking the cycle of depression usually involves a mind-body approach. There are various ways you can help yourself during this time. The following suggestions are not intended to replace medical care, but may enhance your quality of life:

- **Support:** Look for a support group, for either HCV or depression or both. Ask your family and friends for support. Avoid isolation.
- **Avoid or reduce stress:** There are many types of stress management techniques. Yoga, meditation, and stress management classes are a few examples. Some employers, HMOs, and adult education services offer stress management classes.
- **Exercise:** Try to be physically active a little bit every day. Even if you do not like to exercise, find a way to move your body. Walking, gardening, and dancing can be enjoyable ways to be active.
- **Sleep:** Get 7 to 9 hours of sleep every night. Talk to your doctor if you have regular insomnia or other sleep problems.
- **Avoid alcohol and other substances:** Alcohol, tobacco, excess caffeine and drugs can cause or worsen depression and anxiety. Alcohol is a depressant and is incompatible with HCV. Tobacco and caffeine are stimulants and can cause increased anxiety.
- **Eat a healthy diet:** Try to eat a low fat, high fiber diet.

Eat a variety of foods that include fruit, vegetables, and whole grains.

- **Balance rest and activity:** Schedule a daily rest period. Pace yourself, take breaks, plan ahead, and delegate responsibilities.
- **Practice positive thinking:** Listen to your internal thoughts. Try to replace negative thoughts with messages of hope and affirmation. Practice positive thinking even if you do not believe it. Over time, positive thinking can become a habit, and can help improve many aspects of your health.
- **Find ways to laugh and amuse yourself:** Try to pick at least one pleasurable activity and find the time to do it often. Laughter may not be “the best medicine,” but it sure helps.

### *Herbs*

Some consumers use herbs and supplements. As with any medication, you should know what type you are using and how to use it. Tell your medical provider about all the substances you are taking, including herbs, vitamins, and nonprescription drugs. Herbs can interact with other drugs, so it is important to provide a complete account of whatever you are taking. For instance, milk thistle may interfere with the effectiveness of certain antidepressants and birth control pills.

**Sometimes, *St John's Wort*** is used for mild depression. This herb is metabolized primarily by the liver and can elevate liver function test results. To date there is no solid research on the use of *St John's Wort* with interferon or ribavirin. *St. John's Wort* is not intended for more serious depression. It does have potential side effects and the potential to interact with other drugs. If you do take *St. John's Wort*, stop it one week before any surgical procedure.

### *Final Words of Encouragement*

Feeling better takes time! Do not expect yourself to be free from depression overnight. However, with professional and self-help support, it is reasonable to expect yourself to improve gradually. Do not settle for a small improvement—depression can be treated. Aim for feeling great. With patience and professional help, this is a reasonable goal.

*Disclaimer: The diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric and other medical disorders requires a trained medical professional. Information contained in this factsheet is intended for educational purposes only. It should NOT be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment of any mental/psychiatric disorders. Please consult a medical professional if the information here leads you to believe you or someone you know may have a psychiatric or other medical illness.*

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## Resources

### *National Institute of Mental Health*

www.nimh.nih.gov

Information Resources and Inquiries Branch

6001 Executive Boulevard Room 8184, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892-966

(866) 615-6464

### *National Mental Health Information Center*

mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

P.O. Box 42557

Washington, DC 20015

(800) 789-2647

### *Canadian Mental Health Services*

www.cmha.ab.ca

328 Capital Place

9707-110 Street NW

EDMONTON, Alberta T5K 2L9

(780) 482-6576

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**For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit [www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org).**

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The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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