

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

# *HCV and Mental Health: Medical Treatment for Depression*

Lucinda K. Porter, RN

*Depression is a medical condition that can be treated. 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 recommended. Psychotherapy uses counseling tools to treat depression and other mental illnesses. Although some psychiatrists offer psychotherapy, patients may be 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 commonly used to treat depression. Some people have satisfying results with the first medication their doctor prescribes. If an antidepressant does not work well within a reasonable time, do not despair. There are different types of antidepressants, with new ones being introduced regularly. Try to be patient. Although it may be a frustrating process, the benefits can be astounding.

*Caution: Those taking HCV or HIV protease inhibitors should avoid St. John's wort. Nefazodone is rarely used for HCV patients because of the risk of liver failure. Liver enzymes need close monitoring. Duloxetine has a risk of liver toxicity and steatosis, or fatty liver. Bupropion may be associated with an increased risk of interferon-related seizures. Mirtazapine may decrease white blood cell count, which is also a common HCV medication side effect.*

## **Antidepressant Side Effects**

Antidepressant medications can cause side effects, usually these are mild, do not interfere with activities and often resolve over time. 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 include:**

#### **Headaches**

Headaches may occur during the first one to two weeks, but usually go away soon after.

#### **Nausea**

Nausea can also occur during the first one to two weeks and usually resolves after a short time.

#### **Nervousness**

Nervousness may also occur early on and go away after a couple of weeks.

#### **Agitation**

Agitation, or a jittery feeling, occurs less frequently. Notify your doctor if it lasts longer than a day or two.

#### **Sexual problems**

Sexual problems may occur in both men and women. Although common, these are reversible. Tell your doctor if you experience any sexual problems after starting an antidepressant, as there may be ways for your doctor to help.

### ***What to expect during antidepressant therapy***

Antidepressants often take some time before they are effective. Some people may notice improvement in their depressive symptoms in the first one to two weeks, but typically, the medications must be taken regularly for six to eight weeks before their full effect is felt. Antidepressants are usually prescribed for at least six to twelve months, but the length of treatment may vary.

Antidepressants are not “uppers” or “happy pills” and they are not addictive. In order to be used effectively, antidepressants need to be taken on a regular basis. If you miss a dose of the medication, take the next regularly scheduled dose; do not “double up” as this may cause increased side effects.

***Important Note: Never stop a medication without talking to your doctor. Abruptly stopping an antidepressant can have serious consequences.***

If you are taking antidepressants for depression associated with interferon treatment, you should work closely with a medical provider who is knowledgeable about hepatitis C and interferon treatment.

***Important Note: Avoid alcohol, since it can worsen depression and may interact with antidepressants and reduce their effectiveness. Those with HCV should abstain from alcohol use.***

All medications can cause allergic reactions. Tell your doctor about any allergies you might have. Antidepressants can also interact with certain drugs or other conditions. Inform your doctor about any over-the-counter or prescription medications, drugs, or supplements you are using, since these may affect how the antidepressant works. Notify your doctor if you experience any unusual or worsening symptoms.

Although antidepressants are often very 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. However, you should discuss treatment options with your medical provider to find the best treatment for you.

***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***

#### **Canadian Mental Health Association**

(613) 745-7750  
[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

#### **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)**

(800) 950-NAMI (6264)  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

#### **National Institute of Mental Health**

(866) 615-6464  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)


#### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

SAMHSA  
P.O. Box 2345  
Rockville, MD 20847-2345  
(877) SAMHSA-7 or (877) 726-4727  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

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

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<p><b>Executive Director</b> <b>Editor-in-Chief, HCSP Publications</b> Alan Franciscus</p> <p><b>Design</b> Paula Fener</p> <p><b>Production</b> C.D. Mazoff, PhD</p> <p><b>Contact information:</b> Hepatitis C Support Project PO Box 427037 San Francisco, CA 94142-7037 <a href="mailto:alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org">alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org</a></p>	<p>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.</p> <p>This information is provided by the Hepatitis C Support Project • a nonprofit organization for HCV education, support and advocacy • © 2011 Hepatitis C Support Project • Reprint permission is granted and encouraged with credit to the Hepatitis C Support Project.</p>
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