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

Side Effect Management: Anxiety, Mania, and Depression

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Patients report an array of side effects while undergoing HCV treatment with peginterferon and ribavirin. Depression is one of the more common side effects, reported by 20% to 30% of patients. The symptoms of HCV treatment-induced depression are similar to those seen in regular depression, such as feeling “down,” apathetic, and lacking energy. However, some patients experience a variety of other symptoms, many of which they would not associate with depression. This may be important to know especially if you have had a past history of depression. If what you are experiencing now does not feel like depression, you may be less likely to report it. For instance, a patient who previously felt withdrawn when depressed might experience feelings of anger and irritability during treatment. The purpose of this fact sheet is to describe some of the neuropsychiatric side effects of HCV medications so you can discuss these with your healthcare provider.

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

Neuropsychiatric Side Effects

The prescribing information that accompanies peginterferon and ribavirin lists depression, psychosis, and suicide among the potential side effects. Also reported are agitation, mood alteration, aggressive behavior, difficulty concentrating, mania, and bipolar disorder. In clinical trials, irritability, anxiety, and nervousness were reported by a third of patients. Insomnia occurred in 30% of patients and fatigue was 65%. Insomnia and fatigue are symptoms of depression and can also cause or worsen anxiety and depression. Nervousness, insomnia, and fatigue can also be symptoms of other underlying disorders, such as thyroid abnormalities, substance abuse or medication problems.

Anxiety and Depression

Most people think that anxiety and depression are opposite sides of the coin, but in fact they aren't. Anxiety accompanies depression in close to half of all depressed patients. Sometimes referred to as agitated depression, patients may have feelings of irritability, anger, restlessness, or being “on edge.” Some patients may report an increase in worrying or have obsessive thoughts.

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder formerly known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes mood swings. Most of us have normal ups and downs. However, the symptoms of bipolar disorder are much more intense and can be extremely severe. The “down” portion of bipolar is depression and the “up” part is called mania (see Symptoms of Mania). Occasionally a patient will have symptoms of depression, but not have any obvious symptoms of mania. The symptoms of mania may become apparent after starting medication for the treatment of depression. If your doctor prescribes antidepressant medication for you and you notice symptoms of mania, report this immediately. Bipolar disorder can be treated.

Symptoms of Mania

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, some symptoms of mania are:

- Increased energy, activity, and restlessness
- Excessively “high,” overly good, euphoric mood
- Extreme irritability
- Racing thoughts and talking very fast, jumping from one idea to another
- Distractibility, can't concentrate well
- Little sleep needed

- Unrealistic beliefs in one's abilities and powers
- Poor judgment
- Spending sprees
- A lasting period of behavior that is different from usual
- Increased sexual drive
- Abuse of drugs, particularly cocaine, alcohol, and sleeping medications
- Provocative, intrusive, or aggressive behavior
- Denial that anything is wrong

Help for Depression

If you notice any fatigue or mood changes, such as irritability, lack of pleasure, or any signs of depression, talk to your doctor. Antidepressant medications are commonly used to treat depression. These medications can dramatically improve the quality of life during treatment. Since it does take time for antidepressant medications to take effect, do not expect immediate results. 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.

When it becomes time to stop taking antidepressant medications, patients need to be tapered off slowly. Some patients wait a month or more after they have completed HCV treatment before they feel they are ready to stop taking antidepressants. Some patients have noticed symptoms of anxiety and depression during the time they stop taking antidepressant medication. Never stop a medication without talking to your doctor.

The symptoms of medication-induced depression and anxiety will gradually fade away after your HCV treatment has ended. It may take time before you feel life has "returned to normal." Patience and support will serve you well.

Disclaimer: The diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric and other medical disorders requires a trained medical professional. Information contained in this article 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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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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