

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

# *HCV and Mental Health: Overview of Depression*

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*There are over 20 million adults in the United States who live with depression. This is nearly 10% of this country's population. People living with hepatitis C (HCV) are at greater risk for depression. This risk increases even more for HCV patients during treatment with interferon and ribavirin.*

## ***What is Depression?***

Depression is a medical illness. It can be very serious and even life threatening. There are different kinds of depression, such as *major depression*, *dysthymia*, and *bipolar disorder*. Basically, depression is an illness that affects peoples' moods. In general, people with depression have low energy levels that interfere with their ability to enjoy life or perform well in activities. Dysthymia is characterized by a lack of enjoyment in life in which people feel slightly depressed most of the time for at least 2 years. People who have bipolar disorder usually experience mood swings, which can alternate between low or high energy periods. These "highs" are referred to as *manic* or *mania stages*.

## ***Symptoms***

The symptoms of depression vary among people. The following symptoms have been adapted from the National Institute of Mental Health's booklet titled: *Depression* (available at: [www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm))

- Feeling sad, anxious, or "empty"
- Crying spells with no reasonable explanation
- Feeling hopeless or pessimistic
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness
- Feeling restless or irritable
- Loss of interest or enjoyment in hobbies, social activities and sex
- Fatigue or decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, sometimes accompanied by decision-making and memory problems
- Insomnia and other sleep-related problems
- Appetite loss and/or weight loss; overeating and weight gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts

**The symptoms of mania vary. Some common indicators are:**

- Feeling overly excited with no reasonable explanation
- Feeling very irritable
- Decreased need for sleep
- Excessive talking
- Racing thoughts
- Increased sexual desire
- Markedly increased energy
- Poor judgment
- Inappropriate social behavior

## ***Treatment***

There are treatments for all forms of depression. However, not everyone responds equally well to all forms of treatment. Fortunately, there are many choices of treatments. The main goal is to find a doctor or other specialist that you want to work with. It is important to work with a medical specialist you trust since treatment does not usually work immediately. Try to be patient, although this is easier said than done when we aren't feeling well. However, patience is an important part of healing.

## ***Seeing a Professional***

If you think you are depressed, talk to your doctor or primary care practitioner. 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. You also may be referred to a non-medical mental health professional for 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 help find ways to manage your depression.

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

### *Medication*

Sometimes medications are prescribed for depression. There are many different types of antidepressants. Antidepressant medications can cause side effects that 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, this may be improved by an antidepressant that is slightly sedating. **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.**

### *Depression and HCV Treatment*

Studies have shown that antidepressants can help reduce depression associated with hepatitis C treatment. If you are taking antidepressants for depression associated with HCV treatment, you should work closely with a healthcare provider who is knowledgeable about hepatitis C and interferon treatment.

### *Ways to Help Yourself*

It is important to take good care of yourself especially during this time. Although not a substitute for proper medical care some additional suggestions are:

- Get support from your family and friends
- Avoid or reduce stress
- Try to be physically active a little bit every day
- Get at least 8 hours of sleep every night
- Avoid alcohol and non-prescribed substances
- Eat healthy foods
- Find ways to laugh and amuse yourself
- Avoid isolation
- Balance rest and activity
- Practice positive thinking

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 cured. Aim for feeling great. With professional help, this is a reasonable goal.

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

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