

Caring for Your Mental Health during Hepatitis C Treatment



UHN

Information for patients

Along with the benefits of taking medication to treat hepatitis C, some side effects are possible. Medications such as interferon-alpha are known to affect mental health – that is your moods, emotions and overall well-being. By taking care of your mental health, you can stay on your medication and continue to enjoy your life, relationships and work.

How can hepatitis C treatment affect my mental health?

Common side effects during treatment with interferon-alpha include:

- depression
- mood swings
- feeling irritable, tired or anxious
- trouble sleeping
- “brain fog”- trouble with thinking and concentration

Although it is rare, serious side effects are possible. These include thoughts of suicide and losing touch with reality (psychosis).

The good news is that:

- ✓ These side effects are treatable.
- ✓ Nearly all of these side effects will go away after treatment. Most people feel better by 6 months after treatment; and some feel better sooner.

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Created: 07/2009

Form: D-5629 (08/2009)



Who will develop side effects?

About 1 in 4 people develop depression during treatment with interferon-alpha. This usually happens during the first 12 weeks of treatment. Most people have mild to moderate symptoms.

There is a greater chance of having depression during treatment if you had symptoms of depression before you started treatment. Tell your doctor if you have a history of mental illness such as depression, so that your symptoms can be well-controlled before starting treatment.

Sleep problems, irritability and mood swings are common during hepatitis C treatment. If you had mild symptoms before treatment, they are likely to get worse.

How can I tell if I have depression during treatment?

Watch for these symptoms of depression:

- feeling sad or crying for no reason
- loss of interest in your usual activities
- sleeping too little or too much
- feeling guilty or worthless
- difficulty thinking or remembering things
- changes in appetite
- low energy or feeling more tired
- feeling slowed-down or restless
- hopelessness or repeated thoughts of death

You may have depression caused by interferon-alpha if you have several of these symptoms, nearly every day, for more than 2 weeks during treatment.

**If you have symptoms of depression, see your doctor.
No matter what the cause, depression is an illness that can be treated.**

Treating depression helps you stay on your interferon-alpha medication. This gives you the best chance of successfully treating hepatitis C.

How is depression treated?

The best treatment for depression is a combination of medication and therapy.

1. Medication

Medications that relieve symptoms of depression and/or anxiety are called antidepressants. These medications:

- are safe for you to take with interferon-alpha
- can be started before or during hepatitis C treatment
- may start to relieve symptoms in 2 weeks and reach full effect in 4 to 6 weeks
- are usually continued until you finish taking interferon-alpha
- are not addictive – you can gradually stop taking them at any time with your doctor’s supervision

Your doctor may also prescribe other medications to help with mood swings, irritability, anxiety, or trouble sleeping.

2. Therapy

Talk therapies, also called “psychotherapy”, are also helpful for treating depression and other mental health needs. Talk therapies can help you:

- talk about yourself and express your feelings
- find ways to relax and cope with stress
- learn to manage the symptoms of depression to get the best results from your treatment

What can I do to help myself?

1. Choose healthy living

Taking care of your body helps your mental health.

- Eat well. Learn how to make healthy food choices from Canada’s Food Guide.
- Stay active. Make physical activity a part of your daily routine.
- Make healthy lifestyle choices. Stop using drugs and alcohol. They affect your mood and mental health.

To learn more about healthy living visit Health Canada’s website at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/index-eng.php.

2. Get support

Talk with people who can give you support. Share your feelings with close friends and family members. Let them know about the possible changes to your mental health during treatment. If they know, they may be able to help!

Join a support group. It can be helpful to talk with people who have had similar experience. To find a support group in your area, contact the Canadian Liver Foundation. Call toll-free 1-800-563-5483 or visit their website at www.liver.ca.

3. Work closely with your health care team

Keep your treatment team in the loop. Let them know if you have symptoms of depression or are concerned about your mental health.

Tell your doctor right away if your symptoms get worse.

If you have thoughts of suicide, get help immediately. Call your doctor, go to the nearest hospital emergency room or call 911.

Ask your doctor for a referral to a psychiatrist if you have a history of depression or other mental health concerns. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who is an expert in mental health care. He or she will work with your health care team during your hepatitis C treatment.

Where can I get more information or help?

If you are not sure if you need medical help for depression or anxiety, go to www.torontoliver.ca/content/Psychiatric.html to take an online survey. A score of 10 or more means you should see your doctor.

For more information about support groups in your area, contact the Canadian Liver Foundation:

- call: 1-800-563-5483 (toll-free)
- visit: www.liver.ca
- e-mail: clf@liver.ca

If you would like a mental health check-up before starting hepatitis C treatment or want help with your mental health:

- ask your doctor for a referral to a psychiatrist, or
- call the Hepatology Mental Health Clinic at Toronto Western Hospital Liver Centre at 416-603-5914 or visit their website at www.torontoliver.ca.