



## HEPATITIS C

Information, advice, testing,  
support & training service

Side effects – coping with mind, mood & emotional problems

**Important Note:** The diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric and other medical disorders requires a trained medical professional. Information contained in this guide is intended for educational purposes only. It should *not* be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment of any mental or psychiatric disorder. 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

### ***Cognitive Changes and Difficulty Concentrating***

Loss of concentration, memory, and the ability to think clearly are frequent side effects of HCV treatment. But not everyone has these symptoms, and those who do have a wide range of experiences. If this is a problem for you, start by talking to your clinical specialist. Many factors can cause cognitive changes. Medication can help alleviate some cognitive problems.

#### ***Tips for managing concentration and cognition problems:***

- Be physically active on a daily basis. A combination of stretching, strength training, and aerobic activity is an ideal approach
- Eat a nutritional diet. Fruits and vegetables, along with other high-value foods, can provide nourishment for your brain. Do not skip meals
- Avoid ammonia rich foods, ground, cured and processed meats, aged cheese and gelatin
- Drink sufficient water
- Manage stress, meditation and relaxation techniques can help you think more clearly
- Avoid alcohol and unhealthy substance use
- Get sufficient sleep, the average adult needs seven to nine hours of sleep each night
- Breathe, oxygen is essential to our brains
- Stay mentally active

As for forgetfulness, there are techniques you can use to improve your memory. Libraries usually have books on memory improvement.

### ***Tips for improving memory:***

- Use daily or weekly pill containers
- Use a calendar or diary to note when you are scheduled to take medications as well as when you have taken them. You can also use this to keep track of your medical appointments
- Use post-it notes to remind yourself of medical appointments and medication schedules
- Set the alarms on your wristwatch, alarm clock, electronic organizer, phone or computer to remind you about medication and appointment times
- Get yourself organized
- Create habits and daily routines
- Write things down and keep your lists in the same place
- Do one task at a time, rather than multi-tasking
- Pay attention to what you want to remember
- Visualize what you wish to recall
- Use repetition to fasten something in your memory bank

### ***Depression, Anxiety, Mania, and Other Mood Changes***

The prescribing information that accompanies pegylated interferon and ribavirin lists depression, psychosis, and suicide among the potential side effects.

Agitation, mood alteration, aggressive behavior, difficulty concentrating, mania, and bipolar disorder have also been reported. In clinical trials, irritability, anxiety, and nervousness were reported by a third of patients. Insomnia occurred in 30% of patients and 65% experienced fatigue. Insomnia and fatigue are both symptoms of depression, and can also cause or worsen depression and anxiety. Nervousness, insomnia, and fatigue may also be symptoms of other underlying disorders, such as thyroid abnormalities, substance abuse, or medication problems.

This section will describe some of the neuropsychiatric side effects of HCV medications so you can discuss them with your clinical specialist.

**Important Note: Interferon may cause or aggravate life-threatening neuropsychiatric disorders. If you have thoughts of suicide or hurting yourself or others, seek immediate professional help.**

### ***Anxiety and Depression***

Depression is one of the most common side effects of HCV therapy, reported by 20% to 30% of patients in clinical trials. Some healthcare professionals believe this percentage may be significantly higher. Depression may range from mild to severe. In trials, 1% to 2% of patients reported suicidal thoughts or attempts, and 2% stopped treatment prematurely due to depression.

Most people think that anxiety and depression are opposite sides of the coin, but in fact, they often occur together. Anxiety accompanies depression in close to half of all depressed patients. Sometimes referred to as agitated depression, such patients may have feelings of irritability, anger, restlessness, or being “on edge.” Some people may report an increase in worrying or have obsessive thoughts.

### ***Symptoms of Depression***

The symptoms of HCV treatment-induced depression are often similar to those seen in regular depression, and may include:

- Feeling sad, “down,” or “blue”
- Fatigue or low energy
- Irritability or anger
- Agitation or restlessness
- Feeling “on edge”
- Mood swings
- Feeling apathetic or “empty”
- Inability to concentrate
- Excessive worry
- Change in appetite
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide

For patients with a history of depression, interferon- induced depression may be experienced differently than previous episodes. For example, a patient who previously felt withdrawn when depressed might experience feelings of anger and irritability during treatment. This is important to know, because if what you are experiencing now does not feel like previous episodes of depression, you may be less likely to report it.

### ***Help for Anxiety and Depression***

If you are considering HCV treatment, tell your clinical specialist if you have a current or past history of depression or psychiatric illness. It is especially important to report severe depression, hospitalization for any psychiatric illness, or any suicide attempts.

Sometimes antidepressant medications are used in conjunction with HCV treatment. Many patients say that antidepressants made a huge difference in their quality of life while undergoing HCV treatment. Depression does not always start immediately after beginning HCV therapy. Often, patients do not notice depression until four to twelve weeks or even longer into treatment. If you notice any fatigue or mood changes such as irritability, lack of pleasure, or signs of depression after starting interferon, talk to your doctor.

It takes time for antidepressant medications to take effect, so do not expect immediate results. While some people may notice improvement after a week or two, antidepressants typically must be taken regularly for six to eight weeks

before their full effect is felt. Starting antidepressants before beginning interferon can help prevent depression or lessen its severity. Since antidepressants can help with other medical complaints, such as fatigue and insomnia, some doctors routinely start patients on these medications prior to initiating HCV treatment.

Talk with your doctor about whether you should start antidepressants prior to HCV therapy or start interferon first and then see whether you think you need treatment for depression. There are many different types of antidepressant medication. Antidepressants themselves can cause side effects, but they are usually mild. However, some side effects can be serious; tell your doctor about any side effects that are unusual, annoying, or affect your activities or quality of life. Common antidepressant side effects include drowsiness, headaches, nausea, feeling agitated or jittery, and sexual problems.

Sometimes a drug's side effects can actually work in a positive way. Insomnia, for example, may be alleviated by an antidepressant that is slightly sedating. Antidepressants can interact with certain drugs; inform your doctor about any over-the-counter or prescription medications, recreational drugs, herbs, or supplements you are using, since these may affect how your antidepressant works.

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

When it is time to stop taking antidepressant medications, patients need taper off slowly. Never stop a medication without first talking with your doctor. The symptoms of interferon-induced depression and anxiety will gradually fade away after your HCV therapy has ended. Some people wait a month or more after completing HCV treatment before they feel ready to stop taking antidepressants. You may notice increased anxiety and depression after discontinuing antidepressants. It may take time before you feel life has "returned to normal." Patience and support will serve you well.

### ***Bipolar Disorder***

Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain condition characterized by 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" phase of bipolar is depression, while the "up" phase is called mania. Occasionally, a bipolar patient will have symptoms of depression, but not have any obvious symptoms of mania. However, the symptoms of mania may become apparent after starting medication for the treatment of depression. If you notice symptoms of mania after starting antidepressants, report these immediately. Like simple depression, bipolar disorder can be treated.

## ***Symptoms of Mania***

Symptoms of mania include:

- Increased energy, activity, and restlessness
- Excessively “high,” overly good, euphoric mood
- Extreme irritability
- Racing thoughts and jumping from one idea to another
- Talking very fast
- Distractibility, unable to concentrate well
- Little need for sleep
- Unrealistic beliefs about one’s abilities and powers
- Poor judgment
- Spending sprees
- A prolonged period of behavior that is different from usual
- Increased sexual drive
- Abuse of drugs, particularly cocaine, alcohol, or sleeping medications
- Provocative, intrusive, or aggressive behavior
- Denial that anything is wrong

## ***Self-Help for Mood Changes***

The mind and the body are not separate or independent from one another. 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 may require a mind-body approach. There are a number of ways you can help yourself. The following suggestions are not intended to replace medical care, but may enhance your quality of life.

### ***Tips for managing mood changes:***

- Get support look for a support group, either for hepatitis C or for depression. Ask your family and friends for support; avoid isolation
- Avoid or reduce stress. Try stress management techniques such as yoga and meditation, or take a stress management class
- Try to be physically active every day. Even if you do not like to exercise, find a way to move your body
- Get at least eight hours of sleep each night
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, excess caffeine, and recreational drugs, which can cause or worsen depression and anxiety
- Eat a healthy low-fat, high-fiber diet that includes fruits, vegetables, and whole grains
- Balance rest and activity; pace yourself take breaks, plan ahead, and delegate.
- Practice positive thinking; try to replace negative thoughts with messages of hope and affirmation
- Find ways to laugh and amuse yourself; try to pick at least one pleasurable activity and find the time to do it often

