

DEPRESSION

A Side Effect of Chronic Illness

Depression is a prolonged emotional state of feeling sadness, dejection, lack of worth and emptiness. Depression can be caused by a chemical imbalance, which can be a side effect of prescription drugs, or a genetic predisposition to depression.

It can also be caused by a lack of sleep or exercise. Depression can also be “situational,” and occur during a personal crisis or death of a loved one.

Other symptoms of depression include a depressed or irritable mood, a constant preoccupation with oneself, a bad temper, ongoing agitation, a loss of interest in positive activities, a sense of worthlessness or sadness and reduced pleasure in daily activities.

Other symptoms include suicidal thoughts, fatigue, a change (usually a loss) of appetite, memory loss, unintentional weight loss or gain and an inability to concentrate. Other symptoms include difficulty sleeping or sleeping an excessive amount, excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt and excessively irresponsible behavior.

The more symptoms a person has or the more pronounced they are, the more serious the problem.

Whatever the source, if you or your child with viral hepatitis is depressed, it is important that you find help. Hepatitis poses enough challenges, and if untreated, depression can add heavily to the load.

In general, depression can be treated with the help of a mental health professional who can determine if depression is short-term, which can be a natural result of having to address a painful situation, or a serious, long-term problem.

There are several levels of depression:

- Minor depression is short-term and is characterized by a sense of downheartedness, dejection and sadness.
- Moderate depression is highlighted by a variety of symptoms, including poor socialization and communication skills, noticeably disturbed thought processes and

sensory dysfunction.

- Severe depression exists when the patient is withdrawn, uses no verbal or facial expressions, is indifferent toward his or her surroundings, and/or shows signs of delusional thinking and limited physical activity.

In addition to depression caused by emotional issues, depression can also be a side effect of the drugs taken to treat viral hepatitis or other diseases.

According to experts, interferon alpha used by adults or children for treatment of chronic viral hepatitis may produce a number of side effects, including anxiety and depression.

Unlike other interferon alpha side effects, depression and irritability tend to increase in severity, rather than decrease, with time.

A recent posting in an online message forum supported this view. According to the 11 year-old author, "I was put on interferon and gave myself a shot every day for 12 months. The doctor wanted me to go 18 months, but I had become very depressed and actually tried to kill myself. I can honestly say that interferon ruined my life."

Fortunately, people can battle drug-related depression. Administering interferon at night may reduce the frequency of side effects. Dose reduction can also lessen the depression or anxiety that can result from the drug.

Taking an anti-depressant may be appropriate. Recent studies that tracked the combination of interferon alpha and paroxetine, an anti-depressant, were encouraging, but final results are inconclusive at this time.

Of the interferon alpha users in the study who took a placebo instead of the paroxetine, 45 percent became severely depressed, compared to 11 percent who took both the interferon alpha and actual paroxetine.

If a child appears to have drug-related depression, parents should immediately talk to their doctor.

Minor depressive episodes, particularly those that ebb and flow with your child's medical progress, are to be expected. Children with viral hepatitis often become depressed as a result of numerous medical treatments, social stigma and the feeling of being different.

Chronic diseases, particularly in children, are difficult for parents to deal with. Support groups, education, and communication are often the best medicines for treating minor bouts of depression.

Knowing they aren't "in this thing alone" can help parents and children with viral hepatitis over the occasional hump. Moderate to severe depression should be addressed with a mental health professional as soon as possible.

