

# Depression in chronic conditions

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When first diagnosed with a chronic condition, patients often feel overwhelmed with new challenges. These might include numerous medical appointments or new prescriptions with complex dosing schedules and intimidating side effect profiles. Many patients also struggle with the unpredictable changes and functional limitations associated with their condition, the biologic effects of the disease or a combination of these factors.<sup>1</sup> Given such lifestyle changes, it is no surprise that those managing chronic conditions often live with depression as well.<sup>1</sup>

## Depression

Depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States, affecting about 15.7 million adults.<sup>2</sup> Symptoms of depression can vary from person to person. (See Table.) Depending on its severity, depression can affect many aspects of daily life.

### Symptoms of depression<sup>2</sup>

Anger and irritability

Changes in appetite or sleep patterns

Chronic pain

Difficulty concentrating

Fatigue

Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness

Feelings of guilt or worthlessness

Loss of interest in activities

Prolonged feelings of sadness or emptiness

Restlessness

Thoughts of death or suicide

Withdrawal from friends and family

Those living with chronic medical conditions are at a higher risk for depression.<sup>1</sup> It is associated with a poorer prognosis, lower adherence and a more rapid decline in health.<sup>1</sup> Despite these connections, however, research suggests that the presence of a chronic illness might actually reduce the likelihood that healthcare providers recognize or treat depression.<sup>1</sup> And some patients might mistakenly attribute nonspecific symptoms of depression, such as fatigue and loss of appetite, to their chronic condition instead of depression.<sup>1</sup>

Identifying and treating depression is a vital part of treating chronic conditions. Studies suggest that depression can worsen the course of many chronic illnesses.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the links between depression and certain chronic conditions can help clinicians improve the identification, monitoring and treatment of depression in patients with lifelong conditions.

## Cancer

When a patient is diagnosed with cancer, it is often an emotional time filled with uncertainties, worries and fear. Not surprisingly, depression can be a common among cancer patients, from diagnosis throughout treatment.<sup>3</sup> Although managing cancer and its treatments can be overwhelming in itself, it is also important to tend to symptoms of depression. Studies show that people who are depressed during a serious illness are more likely to suffer more severe symptoms of both the depression and the illness.<sup>3</sup> Additional studies have found that depression can even predict mortality in cancer patients.<sup>4</sup> Counseling, treatment or certain lifestyle changes might help cancer patients manage depression and their overall health. Clinicians can help educate patients on the importance of taking action and seeking professional help if they experience symptoms of depression.

## Chronic inflammatory disease

Patients with inflammatory disease, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA) or psoriasis, also face a greater risk for depression. Research suggests patients with psoriasis are one and a half times as likely to experience depression compared with the rest of the population.<sup>5</sup> The etiology of depression in these populations can be multifaceted. In some cases, systemic inflammation, with the continual stimulus of proinflammatory cytokines, can trigger depression.<sup>6</sup> Depression can also be the result of coping with symptoms, stigmas and disabilities resulting from an inflammatory condition. For example, patients with a visible psoriatic rash might feel isolation and embarrassment. Likewise, RA patients experiencing a flare might feel helpless when losing the ability to perform normal daily tasks. Studies have shown that RA patients with depression have worse health outcomes than their nondepressed counterparts, including failed medication adherence, increased pain, disability or death.<sup>6</sup> Effective management of symptoms, paired with depression screening, is critical to improving the outcomes in patients with chronic inflammatory conditions.

## Diabetes

About 34 million Americans live with diabetes.<sup>7</sup> Adherence to prescribed treatment and lifestyle changes is critical for a patient to successfully manage diabetes and prevent its complications. And because those with diabetes are more likely to have depression than the general population, managing depression is critical, too.<sup>8</sup> Even low levels of depressive symptoms can affect a person's ability to manage diabetes.<sup>8</sup> Depressive symptoms have been found to be predictors of failed adherence to diet, exercise and medications.<sup>8</sup> And patients with major depression are 2.3 times more likely than other diabetic patients to have missed medication doses in the previous week.<sup>8</sup> Monitoring and managing depression in diabetic patients is key to improving self-care and reducing complications.

## Multiple sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic, often disabling, autoimmune disease that affects about one million Americans.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that up to half of patients with MS may experience depression in their lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Depression in MS is complex. Some medications used to treat MS might cause or exacerbate depression.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the location of lesions in MS can affect the pathogenesis of depression in patients.<sup>10</sup> And nonspecific symptoms of depression, such as fatigue and cognitive impairment, are sometimes mistaken for symptoms of MS.<sup>11</sup> MS can cause a wide variety of symptoms based on what part of the brain is affected. As a result, patients might suffer a number of symptoms, including fatigue, cognitive decline or difficulty completing daily tasks. It is no surprise that coping with unpredictable symptoms and a decline in functional status could lead to depression. As part of ongoing care for MS, regular screenings for depression might help improve quality of life.

## Transplant

Depression and anxiety are common challenges among transplant patients as well.<sup>12</sup> Depressive symptoms have been associated with failed adherence to immunosuppressant medication.<sup>13</sup> This effect is significant, as medication adherence is crucial in reducing the risk of transplant/graft failure or loss and mortality in transplant patients.<sup>14</sup> As such, it is critical to identify patients with depression who are at risk of not taking medication as prescribed. Regular mental health screenings could increase a transplant patient's quality of life and success with prescribed therapy.

## Managing depression

Some patients might see depression as a sign of weakness. Clinicians have an important role in eliminating this stigma through early conversations with patients about the reality of depression in chronic illness. Educating patients on common symptoms of depression can help them identify any early signs. And reminding patients that depression is an illness might make them more likely to seek

professional help when needed. Healthcare professionals trained in behavioral health can help patients find ways to accept and cope with chronic illness.<sup>2</sup>

Learning skills to manage depression is vital to a patient's overall well-being. Clinicians can help patients find practical ways to cope. For example, journaling might help some patients improve physical and mental health.<sup>15</sup> For other patients, staying active, engaging in activities unrelated to treatment and socializing with others outside of their treatment community might help.<sup>3</sup> It might also be useful for patients to define and work toward specific goals for self-care.<sup>16</sup> Along with lifestyle changes for self-care, some patients might require antidepressant medication as well. By having open discussions about behavioral health, clinicians and patients can find the best approach to managing depression alongside a chronic condition.

## About the author

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