# Depression and Chronic Illness FACT SHEET

Chronic (long-term) illness is related to increased symptoms of depression. Examples of chronic illness include:

- heart disease
- Parkinson's disease
- multiple sclerosis
- stroke
- cancer
- diabetes
- chronic pain syndrome

Depression should not be dismissed as a "normal" reaction to chronic illness, but it is common. Depression is a problem for 15-25 percent of cancer patients. One study found that one-third of patients with advanced cancer and one-fifth with terminal cancer experience a depressive disorder. Sadly, less than half of those receive treatment for depression.

Facing a chronic illness naturally leads to feelings of uncertainty, grief, sadness, anger or fear. But when these feelings continue and disrupt quality of life and day-to-day functioning, depression may be the culprit. Both physical effects of illness and behavioral reactions contribute to this risk.

Behavioral reactions during chronic illness associated with depression include:

- decreased adherence to treatment
- being more likely to smoke and drink
- lack of physical activity
- poor eating habits

Because of these behaviors, the effects of chronic illness and prospects of recovery may worsen.

When symptoms of depression are present alongside symptoms of chronic illness, it is necessary to treat both—not just the symptoms of chronic illness. The treatment is similar to the recommended treatment for other people with depression. Persons with depression should seek treatment as soon as depressive symptoms appear because early treatment is more likely to be effective.

**Coping**

- To cope with a chronic illness and depression, the first step is acceptance of the condition. Before depression and chronic illness can be treated, both must be accepted at least to a basic degree.
- Support groups can be a valuable way to fight depression. NAMI state and local affiliates offer several support and education programs for those with mental illness. (http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?section=Find_Support) NAMI Connection recovery support groups are available in many communities across the country. A support group of others living with chronic conditions may also be helpful.
- Learn about your condition so that you can better manage it. Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you believe your medication is causing your depression, speak with your doctor about alternative treatments. If you are in chronic pain, speak with your doctor about alternative medications or strategies to address that concern.
- If possible, try to remain involved in the activities you've always enjoyed or learn new skills.
- Maintain a daily routine as best you can. Chronic illness is manageable and can be integrated into your life.
- Keep your support network active. Whether it is friends, family, church, golf or another activity, connections to others are helpful to fight depression and isolation.
- Take proper care of yourself. Eating right, exercising and quitting smoking and drinking can reduce the risk of depression and reduce negative effects of chronic illness.

For more information on coping with chronic illness: Link to: http://www.cc.nih.gov/ccc/patient_education/pepubs/copechron.pdf

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