Depression and MS

Depression is very common in people with multiple sclerosis (MS). In fact, symptoms of depression severe enough to require medical intervention affect up to half of all people with MS at some point during their illness.

Why do people with MS have depression?
Depression may be the result of a difficult situation or stress. It is easy to understand how having MS, with its potential for progressing to permanent disability, can bring on depression. Depression may be caused by MS. MS may destroy the insulating myelin that surrounds nerves that transmit signals affecting mood. Depression is also a side effect of some drugs used to treat MS, such as steroids or interferon.

What are the symptoms of depression?
Everyone at one time or another has felt depressed, sad, or blue. Sometimes the feeling of sadness becomes intense, lasting for long periods of time and preventing a person from leading a normal life. This is depression, a mental illness that, if left untreated, can worsen, lasting for years and causing untold suffering, and possibly even resulting in suicide. It is important to recognize the signs of depression, which include:

- Sadness
- Loss of energy
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Loss of enjoyment from things that were once pleasurable
- Difficulty concentrating
- Uncontrollable crying
- Difficulty making decisions
- Irritability
- Increased need for sleep
- Inability to fall or stay asleep at night (insomnia)
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Stomachache and digestive problems
- Decreased sex drive
- Sexual problems
- Headache
- A change in appetite causing weight loss or gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Attempting suicide
When to seek help
You should seek help:

- If depression is negatively affecting your life -- causing difficulties with relationships, work issues, or family disputes -- and there isn't a clear solution to these problems.

- If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts or feelings.

Where should I go to get help?
Once you decide to seek medical help, start with your primary doctor. He or she can evaluate you to make sure that medicines or another illness are not causing your symptoms.

Your doctor may prescribe treatment or refer you to a mental health care professional who can perform a thorough assessment so that an effective course of treatment can be recommended.

How is depression treated?
The first step in treating depression is recognizing that you are depressed. The second step is seeking help. These two steps may, in fact, be the hardest part of the entire treatment process. Once you seek help from a qualified healthcare provider, you will find that there are numerous treatment options to help you get back on track.

Several antidepressant drugs are available, but they must be used only under the supervision of a medical professional. Antidepressant drugs are most effective in treating depression in people with MS when used in conjunction with psychotherapy. Called “therapy” for short, the word psychotherapy actually involves a variety of treatment techniques. During psychotherapy, a person with depression talks to a licensed and trained mental health care professional who helps him or her identify and work through the factors that may be triggering the depression.

Warning signs of suicide
If you or someone you know is demonstrating any of the following warning signs, contact a mental health professional right away or go to the emergency room for immediate treatment.

- Talking about suicide (killing one’s self)
- Always talking or thinking about death
- Making comments about being hopeless, helpless, or worthless
- Saying things like “It would be better if I weren’t here” or “I want out”
- Depression (deep sadness, loss of interest, trouble sleeping and eating) that gets worse
- A sudden switch from being very sad to being very calm or appearing to be happy
- Having a “death wish,” tempting fate by taking risks that could lead to death, like driving through red lights
- Losing interest in things one used to care about
- Visiting or calling people one cares about
- Putting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, changing a will

© Copyright 1995-2009 The Cleveland Clinic Foundation. All rights reserved.