

Depression and Heart Disease

Depression can be a normal mood of temporary sadness after a loss or disappointment. But when depressed mood is severe and accompanied by other symptoms that persist every day for at least 2 weeks, it is a real illness called **major depression** (see below) that requires treatment. The August 14, 2002, issue of *JAMA* includes a study reporting that a particular antidepressant medication was safe and effective for treating major depression in patients who had a recent heart attack.

DEPRESSION AND THE HEART

About 1 in 20 Americans experiences major depression in a given year, but the number goes up to about 1 in 5 individuals who survive a heart attack. Having a depression can prevent a good recovery after having a heart attack. It can also increase the risk of death following a heart attack. So, recognizing and treating depression following a heart attack is very important.

TREATING DEPRESSION

Antidepressant medications and **psychotherapy** (talk therapy) are the most common treatments for major depression and have been shown to be effective. For many patients, using both of these kinds of treatment is best. Unfortunately, some antidepressant medications can have harmful effects on the heart. However, the study reported in the current issue of *JAMA* indicates that a type of antidepressant medication called **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** is safe for heart disease patients.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

- Depressed mood—persistent sad or empty feelings
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyable
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Persistent feelings of decreased energy, tiredness, or listlessness
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Disturbed sleep—sleeping too much or too little, insomnia, waking too early, or oversleeping
- Appetite loss or overeating
- Frequent feelings of either restlessness and irritability or feeling slowed down
- Thoughts of suicide or wishing you were dead

In a **major depression**, 5 or more of these symptoms, including depressed mood or loss of interest, occur every day for at least 2 weeks. Be sure to talk to your doctor if you have such symptoms.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Psychiatric Association
888/357-7924
www.psych.org/public_info
- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
800/950-NAMI (6264)
www.nami.org/illness/index.html
- National Institute of Mental Health
301/443-4513
www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depheart.cfm

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on depression was published in the September 27, 2000, issue, one on postpartum (after pregnancy) depression in the February 13, 2002, issue, one on heart disease in the March 21, 2001, issue, and one on heart attack in the July 28, 1999, issue.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association, National Institute of Mental Health

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