Q&A - Psychological Symptoms

Here are questions answered by medical experts on the topic of Psychological Symptoms and Sjögren’s.

Q. Is depression common among Sjögren’s syndrome patients?

A. Depression is a mood disorder with symptoms ranging from feelings of excessive sadness, increased irritability, sleeplessness or excessive sleep, fatigue, impaired ability to concentrate, loss of appetite, loss of interest in once-enjoyed activities and loss of sexual drive to feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. Not all people who feel “depressed” have clinical depression, and not all people with clinical depression feel “depressed.”

Faced with a diagnosis of a chronic disease of unknown cause with an often variable and unpredictable course, patients can react with fear, anxiety and depression. As with many other chronic diseases, Sjögren’s syndrome (SS) patients report feeling depressed more frequently than do healthy individuals in the general population. In one study, 32% of SS patients reported “possible” clinical depression, which was significantly more frequent than in healthy age-matched female controls.

Symptoms of depression such as fatigue, altered sleep, a change in appetite, loss of interest and mood changes can be seen in medical conditions that can also be associated with Sjögren’s syndrome. These include anemia, thyroid disease and fibromyalgia syndrome. Treatment of these conditions can correct the symptoms that might otherwise be attributed to “depression.”

Fatigue is very common in patients with SS. Although fatigue is more frequently observed in SS patients with depression than SS patients without depression, most SS patients with fatigue are not depressed. Fatigue, as noted above, can be caused by anemia or thyroid disease but it might also be caused by Sjögren’s syndrome itself and as such may respond to treatment of SS.

After medical conditions that can mimic symptoms of depression are ruled out, traditional treatment of depression with support, counseling, psychotherapy and antidepressant medications is effective in SS patients. If you think you might be depressed, remember that you are not alone and the feelings you are experiencing can be reversed. It is important that you speak with your doctor so that your symptoms can be evaluated and the proper treatment can be prescribed for you.

~ Neil I. Stahl, MD
Answered April 2009
Q. My doctor who treats me for my Sjögren’s suggested I see a counselor. What would be the benefits of doing this?

A. Discovering you have Sjögren’s can be shocking. For starters, neither you nor anybody else has even heard of this disease, let alone is able to pronounce it. At the same time, however, you are relieved to know there is a diagnosis and finally realize, “I am not crazy after all.”

But this syndrome is so weird. After relief comes panic and many questions about the future. This anxiety and worry and feeling sick is major, and being able talk about it fully, carefully, openly with a mental health professional can be wonderful for you. By going to a therapist you will have taken yourself to a person who will listen patiently. In addition, he/she will help you understand your emotional responses, normalize many of them, give you support, and help you feel entitled to feeling both upset and temporarily altered from how you once knew yourself. It would be an extra bonus to have a therapist who has medical knowledge or can become familiar with the disease. It would also be helpful if he/she would talk to your doctors when and if necessary (and with your approval).

Some of the major issues that are articulated at our support group meetings are peoples’ fears that they are a burden to their friends and family. A therapist can take away some of that pressure. The other big issue is the sense of isolation at having such an unknown, and often unrecognized, disease. Weekly visits to a mental health professional can go a long way toward reducing the strain and isolation of being and feeling ill with Sjögren’s.

~ Susan S. Needles, LCSW
Support Group Leader, New York City Area
Answered October 2008

Q. Why do my Sjögren’s symptoms get worse after a prolonged period of stress?

A. When you are stressed, your body produces adrenaline, which stimulates the immune system. In response, your body also produces cortisol, a steroid hormone secreted by the adrenal cortex as part of the body’s response to stress. Cortisol has an anti-inflammatory effect. When you are in a stressful situation, your body produces both adrenaline and cortisol at higher levels than normal, and they counter-balance each other. When your stress ends, the body shuts the adrenaline down but continues to produce cortisol for a couple of days, which momentarily weakens the immune system while increasing the body’s anti-inflammatory response, which makes you more susceptible to infection and sickness.

~ Esther Sternberg, MD
Answered April 2008