Pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatment options for depression and depressive symptoms in hemodialysis patients

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Abstract

Depression is a mental disorder with a high prevalence among patients with end stage renal disease (ESRD). It is reported that depression afflicts approximately 20-30% of this patient population, being associated, amongst other, with high mortality rate, low adherence to medication and low perceived quality of life. There is a variety of medications known to be effective for the treatment of depression but due to poor adherence to treatment as well as due to the high need for medications addressing other ESRD comorbidities, depression often remains untreated. According to the literature, depression is under-diagnosed and undertreated in the majority of the patients with chronic kidney disease. In the current review the main pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches and research outcomes for the management of depressive symptoms in hemodialysis patients are discussed.

Introduction

End stage renal disease (ESRD) treated with hemodialysis (HD), is often associated with several comorbidities like hypertension, heart diseases, musculoskeletal problems and diabetes mellitus.1 Patients receiving HD therapy exhibit low levels of perceived quality of life, usually accompanied by significant emotional distress characteristics such as symptoms of depression and anxiety.2 According to the literature, depression is the most common mental disorder in HD patients affecting approximately the 20% of this specific patients group and reported to be the second only to hypertension in frequency as a comorbid diagnosis.3,5 The last decade, nephrologists have looked systematically for signs of depression since depression is recognized as an important factor which among others, influences the overall health status and survival of the patient.6 The aim of this review is to describe and cover in critical fashion the various treatment options available for the management of depression in patients receiving HD therapy and whether those regimes are effective in improving patients’ mental health.

Depression in hemodialysis patients

Definition

According to the 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DMS-IV), depression is defined by having a loss of pleasure or interest for at least a two week period, accompanied by 5 or more psychological, somatic and behavioral symptoms. It is noteworthy that the World Health Organization ranks depression as the leading cause of disability and the fourth leading contributor to the global burden of disease in 2000 worldwide.7 The same organization’s projections indicate that depression will be the highest ranked cause of disease burden in developed countries by the year 2020. Sadness, emotional inhibitions, fatigue, sleep disturbances, loss of concentration, intense guilt, and thoughts of suicide or death are some of the symptoms associated with major depression while thoughts of suicide and death are particular symptoms that are of great concern for the general public.8,9

Epidemiology

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) depression is considered to be the second most common condition in the general population with the reported prevalence of lifetime depression to be around 16%.10 Research findings suggest that the prevalence of depression in the general population is about 12-20%,11 with women reporting higher scores compared to men. In a large WHO study with 245,404 participants from 60 countries from all regions of the world, the prevalence of depression based on ICD-10 criteria was 3.2%, while interestingly, in patients with one or more chronic disease the prevalence of depression climbed between 9.3% and 23.0%.12 In a very recent cross-national study from 18 countries the average lifetime and 12-month prevalence of depression were 14.6% and 5.5% respectively in the high-income counties and 11.1% and 5.9% respectively in the low- to middle-income countries.13 Depression is one of the most common psychiatric abnormalities in patients with ESRD,14,15 affecting approximately 20-30% of the patients,16-18 with some studies reporting even higher percentages.19

Etiology of depression in hemodialysis patients

Causes of depression are linked also to the dialysis treatment per se, which requires from a patient to stay attached to the dialysis machine for approximately 4 hours, 3 times a week, a necessity that contributes significantly to a patient’s low quality of life and restricts independent living.20 It is noteworthy that health care providers frequently fail to identify and/or treat depression in HD patients (70%) despite the high prevalence of the disease.21 In addition, factors such as medication side effects and dietary restrictions may further contribute to the impaired levels of perceived quality of life and the emotional distress experience by the HD population, leading to more severe symptoms.22,23 Other factors that could be blamed for the high prevalence of depression in HD patients are social in nature such as work loss, alterations in one’s family role, experience of multiple losses, medication adherence,14,24-25 low monthly income, years on dialysis and unemployment.26,27 Further, there is some evidence suggesting that depression in HD patients could be the result of factors such as a decline in cognitive skills and sexual function,28,29 as well as low education levels.30 It’s important to recognize that HD patients face many additional challenges which increase the possibility of developing depression or anxiety or other mental conditions. Patients experience major changes in their lifestyle. On the one hand they have very limited, if any, alternative options to the proposed or available treatment of their end-stage renal disease state.

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Measurement of depression

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) is one of the most established instruments used to measure the presence and severity of depression. It is a 21-question inventory developed to measure the degree and severity of the depression’s symptoms. A score of 14-16 or more has been reported to be an accurate measure for the diagnosis of depression in the HD population and has been successfully used, in its original or revised forms. Also, one of the most frequently used personality tests is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). It’s a self-report instrument and contains 566 positive statements dealing with thoughts, feelings, attitudes, physical symptoms and quality of life. Many times instruments assessing aspects of quality of life (QoL) are also used for assessing mental health. The most common questionnaire found in the literature is the SF-36 questionnaire – a self-administered instrument containing 36 items, which assesses health related QoL on eight multi-item dimensions, including vitality and mental health. In clinical practice, the Nine-Question Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), a self-report instrument, is often used to detect five common mental disorders in primary care: depression, anxiety, alcohol abuse, somatoform disorder, and eating disorder. Another instrument used for measuring depression is the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression. The questionnaire lists 21-items and rates the severity of symptoms observed in depression such as low mood, insomnia, agitation, anxiety and weight loss. Moreover, an appropriate tool for assessing depressive symptomatology in the general population is the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CED). A self-report questionnaire, that contains 20 items and asks caregivers to rate how often over the past week they experienced symptoms associated with depression, such as restless sleep, poor appetite, and feeling lonely. Additionally, the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale contains 20 items, ten positively worded and ten negatively worded questions, assessing the level of depression or depressive symptoms.

Treatment options

According to the literature, depression is not only under-diagnosed, but it is also undertreated in patients with chronic kidney disease. In the following text, the main pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches and research outcomes for the reduction of depression symptoms in HD patients are discussed.

Pharmacological management

Multiple classes of medications are available for treatment of depression in the patient with chronic diseases. Despite the availability of high-tech brain imaging systems, health care providers have to prescribe antidepressants using their clinical judgment and other factors such as effectiveness, toxicity, expense, and ease of administration. Most studies support that low doses of antidepressant medications can have therapeutic results in patients maintained on dialysis (Table 1). There are 2 classes of medication with proven benefits for the depressed patient divided in 1st and 2nd generation.

First generation antidepressants

Desipramine and tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) are used orally for treating major depressive disorder. TCAs have been used clinically to treat patients with major depressive illness since the early 1960s. In a small study, the use of TCAs showed a positive effect in HD patients’ levels of depression while in a study by Lee and colleagues (2004), antidepressant treatment decreased the serum level of interleukin-beta1 and increased the serum level of interleukin-6 improving patients’ depression symptoms’ severity with parallel improvements in various immunological and nutritional indices. Other pharmaceutical options for the treatment of depression include monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI) and reverse inhibitors of MAO,.

Second generation antidepressants

The second generation of antidepressants consists of a category called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) including venlafaxine, mirtazapine, bupropion, nefazodone, duloxetine, fluoxetine and fluvoxamine. These act on the central nervous system through their effects on neurotransmitters such as serotonin, norepinephrine, or dopamine. Koo and colleagues (2005) examined the effect of antidepressant treatment in HD patients treated with paroxetine for 8 weeks and found a significant improvement in depressive symptoms. In one study the safety of fluoxetine in patients with kidney disease was assessed. Specifically nine depressive patients with normal renal failure and seven HD patients were given fluoxetine 20 mg/d in an 8 week study. Depression was assessed by HAMD-17, BDI, Montgomery Asberg Depression Rating Scale, Brief Symptom Inventory, Global Well-being Scale, and the Electronic Visual Analog Scale before, during.
Table 1. Overview of depression treatment in hemodialysis patients.

| Reference | Intervention | Diagnosis | Period | Methodology | Outcomes |
|-----------|--------------|-----------|--------|-------------|----------|
| Wuertz et al.52 | 7 (patients) sertraline, 2 bupropion, 2 nefazodone | Clinical depression | 12 weeks | BDI, HAMD, psychiatric interview | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Kennedy et al.53 | Antidepressant therapy (not stated) | Major depression | 7 weeks | BDI, HAMD, MMSE, standardized antidepressant, side effect checklist | Significant recovery in five patients, improvement in one, and discontinuation of therapy in the remaining two |
| Lee et al.54 | 20 mg of fluoxetine | Depressed mood | 8 weeks | HAMD | >50% reduction in the score of the HAMD |
| Koo et al.55 | Paroxetine 10 mg/day | Not specified | 8 weeks | BDI | Changes in depression and nutritional status |
| Turk et al.56 | Sertralin HCl 50 mg/day | Patients who had BDI score ≥15 were diagnosed as depressed | 8 weeks | BDI | Improvement in QOL |
| Lesy et al.57 | Fluoxetine 20 mg/day | Depression | 8 weeks | DSM-III-R, HAMD-17 | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Koo et al.55 | Paroxetine 10 mg/day | Depressive symptoms | 8 weeks | BDI, HAMD | Improvement in depressive symptoms and nutritional status |
| Turk et al.56 | Sertralin HCl 50 mg/day | Depression | 8 weeks | BDI | Improvement in QoL |
| Duarte et al.58 | Cognitive-behavioral therapy | Major depression | 3 months | BDI, SF-36 | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Lii et al.59 | Psychosocial intervention | depression | 2-months | BDI, SF-36 | Depression symptoms and QoL improved significantly |
| Rocha et al.60 | No regular psychological intervention | Depressive symptoms | No details | HADS | A significant reduction of depression symptoms |
| Jorm et al.61 | Relaxation techniques | Depressive symptoms | No details | CCDAN | Effective at reducing self-rated depressive symptoms |
| Tsay et al.62 | Empowerment program | Depression | 6 weeks | BDI | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Cho et al.63 | Acupuncture with massage | Depression | 4 weeks | BDI | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Kim et al.64 | Music therapy | Depression | No details | No details | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Babyak et al.65 | Aerobic exercise (3 times per week) & sertraline therapy | Major depressive disorder | 6 months | HRSD | Improvement in depressive symptoms |
| Koudi et al.66 | Intradialytic exercise | Emotional distress | 1 year | BDI, HADS | Exercise training reduced emotional distress |
| Jung et al.67 | Aerobic and resistance exercise | - | 8 weeks - 12 months | SF-36 | Aerobic and resistance exercise improved depression, and health-related QoL |

BDI, Beck depression inventory; MMSE, mini mental state exam; MHI (SF-36), mental health (short form health survey 36); BDI, hospital anxiety and depression scale; RAND 36, RAND 36-item health survey; CCDAN, the cochrane collaboration depression, anxiety and neurosis review group; HRSD, Hamilton rating scale for depression; QoL, quality of life.
sion, more research is needed on their effectiveness in dialysis and other chronic disease patients.

**Alternative therapeutic approaches**

Alternative therapeutic approaches have always been attractive to chronically ill mental patients since they satisfy their urge for trying and using new ways for relieving their mental and emotional symptoms and at the same time they allow patients to detach themselves from their current medication and possible invasive methods of therapy. For instance, the effectiveness of acupressure with massage in alleviating fatigue and depression in HD patients was examined by Cho and Tsay (2004). Interestingly, the acupressure group reported significantly greater improvements on both fatigue and depression symptoms than the respective group of patients who received the regular unit care.63 Melody and rhythm are two special ways to express feelings and emotions and could be considered as an alternative way of depression treatment. Kim and colleagues (2006) showed that patients treated with music therapy reported a lower score in depression levels compared to the control group who received no therapy.64 The positive impact of music on emotional distress indices was confirmed in a very recent study by Lin et al., where the authors observed that the patients who listened to music during the dialysis sessions exhibited significant reductions in perceived stressors and adverse reactions, a fact that led the authors to conclude that music could be beneficial for promoting wellbeing in HD patients.77

**Exercise training**

Low levels of physical activity have been associated with depression.78 Aerobic and resistance exercise have beneficial effects on dialysis patients’ well-being. Specifically aerobic exercises improve not only physical functioning but also improved nutritional status, hematological indices, inflammatory cytokines, depression, and health-related QoL.15 For example, depressive HD patients who participated in a moderate aerobic exercise program improved their depressive symptoms and had lower relapse rates compared with patients that received sertraline.63,79 Kouidi et al., (2010) examining the effect of exercise training on Heart Rate Variability and depression in HD patients, reported a beneficial effect of an intra-dialytic exercise program on both mental and cardiac autonomic disturbances.66 Also the same researchers showed a relationship between depression and cardiac autonomic dysfunction.66 Moreover, in HD patients with significant motor symptoms (restless legs syndrome) and sleep problems (sleep apneas and periodic leg movements), which also affect mental health, exercise has been shown to improve symptomatology, reduce depressive symptoms, and improve QoL.80

Based on such and other beneficial results of exercise, many research groups suggest that exercise should be a mandatory not an optional intervention in HD patients because of its beneficial effects on the overall health of this population.15,67

**Conclusions**

Hemodialysis patients suffer from many physical and mental conditions. Depression is the most common psychological disorder encountered in 20-30% of HD patients. While hemodialysis is indisputably a life-sustaining treatment for end-stage renal patients it also has an adverse impact on the mental status of these patients.

Depression in HD patients results in poor QoL and higher mortality risk and therefore the need for its successful treatment should receive special attention from nephrologists and other specialists involved in renal patients’ care. Many medications have been shown to be effective for the treatment of depression but due to patient’s poor adherence in treatment as well as due to the high need for medication related to the other comorbidities, depression often remains untreated. To cope with depressive symptoms and improve overall QoL, it becomes imperative to implement a multidimensional approach that includes different intervention strategies.

Treatment of depression should be administered by a team of professionals (psychologists, nurses, physicians, social workers and others) applying different regimes and strategies to provide a better care for the hemodialysis population. It should be noted that the dialysis environment could be an ideal place to observe mood changes, behavior and mental status, however, dialysis units do not usually provide the appropriate privacy for discreet discussions between the patients and health care providers.

In conclusion, depression is a disease that needs to be treated the earliest possible in the life of a hemodialysis patient since it can affect his or her QoL and overall survival. More research is needed to further explore the effectiveness and safety of trusted or new methods for the treatment of depression and depressive symptoms in HD patients.

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