

Managing side effects

Some Hep C medications cause side effects. The side effects of newer medications tend to be mild or moderate. Peg-interferon and ribavirin can have stronger side effects. Some side effects fade after a few weeks as your body gets used to the drugs. If you take peg-interferon, schedule your injections so that if you get side effects the next day, they won't interfere with any activities that are important to you. Fortunately, most side effects can be managed.

Here are some simple ways to manage the following side effects:

Anemia: Your doctor and nurse should monitor this for you and if necessary, recommend appropriate treatment.

Fatigue and flu-like symptoms: Take your peg-interferon at bedtime; try mild exercise; drink lots of water; rest when you need to; talk to your doctor to see if Tylenol or Advil are right for you for muscle and joint pain.

Hair loss: This is a temporary condition. Wash your hair with mild shampoo and avoid colouring your hair.

Depression (feeling low or down): Talk to a healthcare worker, a mental health professional or a trusted community worker; make sure you have emotional and financial support.

Nausea or lack of appetite: Try eating small meals frequently through the day. Avoid greasy and spicy food.

Dry skin: Drink plenty of water. Take quick, lukewarm showers instead of long, hot baths. Use mild moisturizing lotions.

Mouth sores: Eat soft foods that are low in acid; try high-calorie supplements like Boost or Ensure (check for dairy content if you have diarrhea).

The future of treatment

Research is ongoing and treatment options will continue to change over the next few years. The goal is a treatment that can be taken by mouth, is easy to tolerate, only needs to be taken for several weeks and is taken by people with any strain or genotype of the Hep C virus.

Financial help

There are programs that can help you pay for Hep C treatment. Each province and territory has different programs for financial help.

For more information about what Hep C medications are available where you live, talk to your doctor or nurse or check Treatment coverage in your region at www.catie.ca.

Contact:
www.catie.ca
1-800-263-1638



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Hepatitis C: Treatment Options



What is hepatitis C treatment?

The goal of hepatitis C treatment is to clear the Hep C virus from your body. Clearing or curing Hep C is also known as sustained virological response (or SVR).

Medications used to treat Hep C

Until recently, standard Hep C treatment has involved a combination of two medications: peg-interferon and ribavirin. These medications can cause unpleasant side effects. However, there are ways to manage most side effects and get through treatment.

Treatment options for hepatitis C are changing rapidly as more effective drugs become available. These drugs are sometimes combined with peg-interferon and ribavirin or just ribavirin and sometimes they are not. These new combinations have higher cure rates, fewer side effects and shorter treatment times. New drugs include sofosbuvir (Sovaldi), simeprevir (Galexos), Harvoni (ledipasvir + sofosbuvir) and Hologic Pak (dasabuvir + ombitasvir + paritaprevir/ritonavir).

Which treatment is right for you will depend on several factors, including which strain or genotype of the virus you have, the amount of liver damage you have, whether you have already been treated for Hep C and if you have other health conditions. Paying for treatment may also be a factor.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about your options for Hep C treatment. For more information on specific Hep C medications, visit www.catie.ca.

Hep C treatment for people who also have HIV

With some treatments that included peg-interferon, people who have HIV and Hep C had lower cure rates than people who have only Hep C. With newer treatments the cure rates for people with HIV and Hep C are similar to people who have only Hep C.

Things to consider before you start Hep C treatment

Here are some questions you might want to ask your healthcare worker about:

- What are my chances of clearing the virus?
- What is my genotype?
- Do I have other health conditions that could affect my Hep C treatment?
- What if I am pregnant? What if I am planning on using my sperm or eggs to have a baby?
- Am I also living with HIV?
- Will Hep C lead to health problems for me if left untreated?
- Will I be able to follow the pill schedule?
- Will I be able to tolerate the side effects?
- Can I take time off work if needed? Can I get social assistance?
- Can I get help to pay for treatment costs?
- What supports (for example, support groups or counselling) are available to me as I go through treatment?
- Do I have a safe place to stay while I'm on treatment?
- Will other medications or street drugs affect my treatment?

Common side effects of Hep C treatment

The majority of these side effects are caused by peg-interferon or ribavirin.

- anemia (low levels of red blood cells and iron in blood)
- fatigue (tiredness, lack of energy)
- depression
- flu-like symptoms
- insomnia (having trouble falling asleep)
- “brain fog” (difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, confusion)
- temporary and mild hair loss
- temporary nausea and vomiting
- headache
- rash and/or itching

Because of the side effects they cause, some treatments may be harder for people with the following conditions:

- uncontrolled diabetes
- heart, kidney or lung disease
- certain types of mental health issues (like depression, anxiety)
- autoimmune disorders (such as severe arthritis)
- uncontrolled thyroid disease

After treatment

After you have finished treatment, your doctor will do tests to see if the virus has been cleared from your body.

If you are cured from Hep C, it is important to take care of your health and avoid re-infection. If treatment is not successful, you can make changes to your life to stay healthy and reduce liver damage.

Some Hep C treatments can cause birth defects and should not be taken during pregnancy or by either partner considering pregnancy. Talk to your healthcare worker for more details.