

# Managing Hepatitis C Treatment Side Effects

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## **Feeling excessively tired, fatigued or exhausted:**

Many persons with chronic hepatitis C will experience fatigue at some time during their illness or treatment. Here are some things you can do to manage fatigue that will help you stay on your medication and feel better.

### **Rest**

- Frequent short rests can help; try a short nap (less than 1 hour) during the day.
- Pace yourself, alternate periods of rest and work.
- Plan ahead and organize to decrease trips.

### **Work**

- Decide what needs to be done and what can be put off.
- Ask others to help you with some tasks.
- Put off jobs that can be done later when you have more energy.
- Use a cart to carry large loads and limit overhead work.
- Change your work schedule or consider taking the first week or two of therapy off if possible.

### **Exercise**

- Get exercise every day but don't plan to start a hard exercise program during treatment.
- As little as 10 or 15 minutes of activity can help. Some examples are walking, light jogging, bicycling, swimming, or any physical activity you enjoy.
- Alternate periods of activity with rest.

## **Diet**

- Eating healthy can combat fatigue.
- Eat a diet with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fish, chicken, beans and lean meat.
- See a nutritionist for a healthy diet plan.
- Drink plenty of water. Avoid soda, too much caffeine, and alcohol.

## **If you are taking interferon**

- Take your injection at bedtime, that way you can sleep or rest during the worst of the symptoms.
- If your fatigue is worse a day or two after taking your injection, try adjusting your schedule so that those days are not busy.

## **Headache:**

Some of the medications taken during treatment for hepatitis C can cause headache. Some things you can do to prevent or treat headache are:

- 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of water spaced throughout the day can prevent headache.
- Keep the lights dim and wear sunglasses if light triggers or worsens your headache.
- Get plenty of rest. Take a short nap in a quiet, darkened room.
- Try to decrease stress in your life. Meditation, deep breathing and relaxation can help.
- Put a cool pack on your head or neck. A gentle head massage can help.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol) up to 2 or 3 grams daily (325mg to 650mg every 4 to 6 hours) if ok with your health care provider.

If you are experiencing a severe headache, go to the emergency room immediately. If your headache is persistent see your provider for further evaluation and treatment.

## **Loss of Appetite, Weight Loss:**

You may notice a loss of appetite while on medication to treat hepatitis C. It is important to eat a healthy diet and avoid excessive loss of weight to get the best response from treatment. Here are a few ideas to help you manage poor appetite and prevent weight loss.

- Eat smaller and more frequent meals; try to eat 4 – 6 times daily.
- Eat snacks that are high in protein and calories such as: cheese, eggs, nuts and lean meats.
- Drink liquid protein drinks like Carnation instant breakfast<sup>®</sup>, Boost<sup>®</sup> or Ensure<sup>®</sup> if you are not getting enough protein or calories in your daily diet.
- See a nutritionist for a healthy diet plan.
- Maintain good oral hygiene by brushing and flossing every day.

## **Nausea:**

Nausea is a common side effect of many medications and can occur when you are taking medication for hepatitis C. Here are some things you can do to manage or prevent nausea:

- Eat more frequently, 4 – 6 small meals daily.
- Remember to take Ribavirin with food to prevent nausea.
- Try eating cold or room temperature food and avoid any food odors that trigger your nausea.
- If you feel sick to your stomach in the morning eat some crackers or dry toast before getting out of bed.
- If you have an upset stomach, eat bland foods such as milk, yogurt, bananas or crackers.
- Try nibbling on ginger or sipping ginger tea.
- Avoid spicy, fatty, sweet or highly acidic foods when you feel sick to your stomach.
- Applying pressure to your wrist or knee can decrease nausea in some people.

### When to contact your provider

- If your stomach feels like it is burning or you feel heartburn, talk to your provider about antacids.
- If your nausea is not controlled with the above remedies talk to your health provider about anti-nausea medication.
- If you are vomiting or feeling frequently nauseous contact your provider for help.

## **Trouble Sleeping:**

Some of the medications used to treat Hepatitis C can interfere with sleep. It is important for you to be well rested. Here are some things you can do to improve your sleep quality.

- Take ribavirin early in the evening at 4pm or 5pm if it makes you jittery and interferes with your sleep.
- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Limit daytime naps to less than an hour.
- Try sleeping with a mask over your eyes or put block out shades on your bedroom windows.
- Set the bedroom temperature down to 65 degrees or cooler.
- Wear ear plugs if noises are keeping you awake.
- Stop TV viewing and computer use at least 2 hours before bedtime.
- Do not read or watch TV in bed.
- Turn the clock face away from you.
- Stop drinking coffee or caffeine-containing beverages after noon.
- Try not to eat heavy meals within 2 to 3 hours of bedtime.
- Taper the amount of liquid you drink in the evening so that you won't need to get up to use the bathroom at night.
- Take a warm bath before bedtime and establish a bedtime routine.
- A glass of warm milk before bedtime helps some people fall asleep.
- Exercise early in the day can promote good sleep. Avoid exercise in the hours before bedtime.
- If worry, anxiety or depression, is keeping you awake talk to your provider and consider joining a support group and/or seeing a counselor.

## **Itching and Rash:**

Skin irritations can occur during hepatitis C treatment. Here are some things you can do to lessen this troublesome symptom:

- Stay well hydrated by drinking a minimum of 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of fluid daily. Drink non-caffeinated liquids.
- Use mild non-soap cleansers like Neutrogena<sup>®</sup>, Cetaphil<sup>®</sup>, or Basis<sup>®</sup>.
- Bathe with water that is lukewarm; water that is too hot will dry your skin.
- Try a bath with Aveeno Oatmeal Bath<sup>®</sup> or Keri Bath<sup>®</sup> if your skin is itchy.
- Lubricate your skin within three minutes after getting out of the shower or bath with petroleum jelly or a heavy cream based moisturizer. Try Cetaphil<sup>®</sup>, Aquaphor<sup>®</sup>, or Lac-Hydrin<sup>®</sup> creams.
- Avoid moisturizers containing alcohol or perfumes.
- Rub an ice cube on itchy areas instead of scratching.
- Keep your nails trimmed short to prevent open sores from scratching.
- Use mild laundry products like Ivory Snow<sup>®</sup> or Dreft<sup>®</sup>. Rinse bed linens twice to ensure that all the detergent has been removed.
- Wear sunscreen when outdoors to protect your skin from the drying and burning effects of the sun and to prevent skin cancer.

## Interferon injection sites

- These sites often develop a round spot that can itch, burn and discolor. Generally, this rash is mild and temporary, but sometimes the discoloration can persist for months.
- These areas can be treated with over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream or a stronger prescription steroid cream if needed.
- Rotate your injection sites and do not inject into an area that is red, bruised, or irritated.
- If your injection site has redness with warmth, swelling or pain see a health care provider right away as these could be signs of infection.

## **Flu-Like Illness, Fever**

Flu like symptoms are common during interferon treatment. They are worst at the start of treatment and improve after the first few injections.

- Inject interferon at bedtime and you may be able to sleep through your symptoms.
- If you have a consistent work schedule you may want to do your injection on a day off so you can get more rest during your worst symptoms.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®) 30 minutes before your injection and again 4 -6 hours after can diminish your symptoms of chills, aches and fever. Talk with your health care provider about the dose that is best for you.
- The most important thing you can do is to drink plenty of water to stay well hydrated; 8- 12, 8 oz. glasses of water daily is a good goal.
- Keep a bottle of water with you at all times and drink from it often, but taper off a few hours before bedtime.
- If your temperature stays above 101°F for more than 24-48 hours call your provider or go to the emergency room.

## Diarrhea

Diarrhea may occur when you are taking medications for hepatitis C. There are some things you can do to lessen this troubling symptom.

- Try taking Metamucil® (psyllium) or Citrucel® to add bulk to your stool.
- Eat foods with soluble fiber like bananas, rice, applesauce, and white toast to firm your stool.
- Avoid dairy products during and for several days after diarrhea stops.
- Avoid high acid foods like citrus fruits and spicy foods while you have diarrhea.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water, 8-12, 8 oz. glasses daily.
- If your diarrhea persists beyond 24 hours, your stool is bloody, or you have fever and abdominal pain, call your provider for treatment.

## **Muscle and Joint Aches and Pains/ Back Pain**

Many persons taking interferon will experience general discomfort. There are some things you can do to feel better.

- If you develop body aches 1-3 hours after injecting interferon give your shot at bedtime as you may sleep through the symptoms.
- Apply warm moist heat to areas of discomfort.
- Try gentle exercise like walking, stretching, yoga or Tai Chi.
- Get a massage, try acupuncture and healing touch.
- Try taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen 30 minutes before your weekly interferon injection if okay with your provider.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water, 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of water daily.
- See your provider if you have pain, swelling, or redness in a joint.

## **Irritability, Depression/Anxiety/ Changes in Mood/ Mood Swings**

Some persons who take interferon as part of their hepatitis C treatment will experience changes in mood including depression, anxiety, irritability and mood swings. Persons who have depression issues prior to treatment may experience worsening of their depressive symptoms. There are some things you can do to help yourself feel better while undergoing treatment.

- If you are feeling depressed make an appointment to see your provider as soon as possible.
- Exercise can improve your mood and help prevent or treat depression. Try to get some gentle exercise every day.
- Be sure to stay well hydrated. Drinking at least 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of water every day will improve your energy level and help you feel better during treatment.
- Ask family and friends for emotional support and join a hepatitis C support group.
- Do something enjoyable and just for you every day.
- Keep a gratitude journal; a place where you write down the good things happening in your life and the things you are grateful for.
- Talk to your provider about a referral to a counselor and/or taking antidepressant medication.

Some signs of depression are:

1. Not enjoying the things you usually do
2. Feeling sad or hopeless, crying easily
3. Sleep problems
4. Not having your usual energy
5. Appetite problems
6. Feeling guilty or like a failure
7. Not being able to concentrate
8. Moving slowly or feeling restless
9. Feeling like things would be better if you were dead

**It is important to notify your health care provider if you notice any signs of depression or thoughts of suicide and call a crisis line (877-266-4357 in Alaska) or go to the emergency room if you are feeling suicidal. Have someone stay with you if you feel that you might hurt yourself.**

## **Hair Loss**

If you are on interferon you may experience hair loss. It will get thinner and break more easily the longer you are on interferon. Hair loss may happen on all parts of your body.

Hair will regrow during the first three months after you complete interferon therapy and should return to the thickness it was before. Some things that you can do to manage during this time are:

- Decrease your amount of hair washing and use gentle hair products like baby shampoo.
- Mousse, hair gels and styling products can dry the hair and make combing more difficult resulting in breakage.
- Avoid dyeing, straightening or perming the hair as this is drying and will result in more breakage and hair loss.
- Use a soft hairbrush or wide-toothed comb.
- Use a low setting on the blow dryer or allow your hair to air dry. Avoid the curling iron and straightener during treatment. Heat is drying to the hair and will result in more breakage.
- Avoid ponytails or tight braiding as these pull and could cause your hair to break. You may prefer a shorter hair style during treatment.
- Using a satin pillowcase may reduce pulling on the hair at night and you may have less hair breakage.
- Eat a nutritious diet to avoid vitamin deficiencies that could result in hair loss.

## **Shortness of Breath**

Feeling short of breath while taking ribavirin and interferon can occur due to anemia (a decrease of red blood cells). When you are anemic you may feel short of breath while doing activities that you could previously do without problems. To help you manage if you are short of breath it's recommended that you:

- Slow down, pace yourself and take extra time to complete tasks.
- Break down tasks into smaller parts and take frequent breaks.
- See your health care provider so that your blood count can be monitored and treatment modified if needed.
- Go to the emergency room if you are experiencing a sudden or worsening shortness of breath, especially if it is accompanied by chest pain or difficulty breathing.

## **Dizziness**

Some persons report dizziness when on treatment for hepatitis C. Things you can do to help lessen dizziness are:

- Change position slowly. Moving too quickly from sitting or lying to standing could cause lightheadedness and you could fall.
- Be sure to stay well hydrated. Drinking at least 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of water every day may lessen dizziness. Try a sport drink if you're already dehydrated.
- Have something to eat. Low blood sugar can cause a person to feel dizzy.
- Slow down, sit down and take some deep breaths. Anxiety and stress can sometimes cause a person to feel dizzy and relaxation can help.
- Try chewing on a piece of fresh ginger or sipping ginger tea.

Vertigo (room spinning) is not expected and if you experience this you will want to make an appointment to see your provider for evaluation and treatment.

## **Feeling forgetful, problems concentrating**

Hepatitis C can cause feelings of forgetfulness and you may notice worsening concentration or memory issues while on treatment. These symptoms should improve within a few months after you have completed therapy. Here are some tips that can help you cope with these issues.

- Keep a calendar and write down appointments.
- Keep lists and mark off tasks after they are done.
- Perform tasks requiring concentration when you are well rested.
- Get sleep.
- Let your family, friends and coworkers know that you are having trouble remembering, ask for reminders.
- Eat regular nutritious meals. Hunger can interfere with your ability to focus.
- Be sure to stay well hydrated. Drinking at least 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of water every day will improve your energy level and ability to concentrate.

## Cough

You may notice a dry cough while taking ribavirin. Some things you can do to decrease your cough are:

- Quit smoking.
- Use a humidifier to moisturize the air.
- Stay hydrated and sip on water throughout the day.
- Suck on sugar-free hard candies or cough drops.
- See your health care provider if have fever, chest pain, shortness of breath or sputum in addition to your cough.

## **Heartburn or upset/sour stomach**

- Eat bland foods such as milk, yogurt, crackers, ginger or sip on ginger tea if you have an upset stomach.
- Do not eat spicy, fatty, sweet or highly acidic foods when you have heartburn.
- Avoid heavy meals and foods that cause gas such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, beans and carbonated drinks.
- Alcohol and tobacco will worsen these symptoms.
- Don't lie down for a few hours after eating.
- Try over-the-counter antacids if it's okay with your health care provider.
- If heartburn persists despite making diet changes contact your health provider for help.

## **Dry Mouth**

During treatment with interferon and ribavirin you may notice a dry mouth. There are some things you can do to lessen this side effect and protect the health of your teeth.

- Stay well hydrated. Drinking at least 8-12, 8 oz. glasses of water every day will moisturize your mouth.
- Brush your teeth at least 2 times daily and see your dentist regularly.
- If you vomit rinse your mouth with water thoroughly afterwards.
- Sucking on sugar-free lemon candies can relieve a dry mouth.
- Use mouth moisturizers such as Biotene<sup>®</sup>, Oasis<sup>®</sup>, or Orajel<sup>®</sup>.

## **Decreased or Blurred Vision**

- Rarely persons taking interferon shots have experienced eye problems. These can be as mild as blurred vision but can be severe enough to result in loss of vision.
- If you have hypertension, diabetes or some eye diseases you are at higher risk of vision problems and should have a dilated eye exam before you start treatment with interferon.
- If you develop any vision problems while on therapy contact your health provider.
- If you have any full or partial loss of vision, see your ophthalmologist or go to the emergency room immediately.