



What You Need to Know About Hepatitis C

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis A, B, and C refer to certain viral infections which all affect the liver differently.

There are many causes of hepatitis, including alcohol, recreational drug use, prescription drug use, and viruses. The major types of viral hepatitis are A, B, and C. Hepatitis C is often a chronic infection, which may lead to serious health concerns.

Hepatitis A

- This is caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV).
- It is highly contagious and is typically transmitted via a fecal-oral route, such as person-to-person contact, and also by eating contaminated food and/or water.
- Most people with hepatitis A improve without treatment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016).
- The best defense against hepatitis A is to get vaccinated.

Hepatitis B

- This is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV).
- It is transmitted by infected blood, semen, or other bodily fluids exchanged through sexual contact; by sharing needles and/or syringes; or from mother-to-infant at birth.
- Chronic hepatitis B can lead to cirrhosis or liver cancer.
- The best defense against hepatitis B is to get vaccinated.

Hepatitis C

- Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV).
- It is a blood-borne virus that is usually transmitted via blood by sharing needles or other devices to inject drugs.
- A person who has not had any symptoms, but is infected with HCV, can spread the disease to others.
- Chronic hepatitis C can result in liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, or death.
- Recent advancements in treatment options have led to a cure for most people with this disease.
- Unlike with hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine available for hepatitis C.

Treating hepatitis C

Just like there are different types of hepatitis, there are also different types of hepatitis C viruses. There are actually six types (known as “genotypes”). Your doctor will order blood tests to help determine the best treatment options for you. Recently, there has been a significant increase in the number and types of medications available to treat this condition. Some are specific to certain genotypes, others are more broad. Depending on your medical history and the results of lab and blood tests, your doctor will prescribe a medication that is best for you.

In the past, there were limited options for HCV. Most treatment plans used two drugs: pegylated interferon and ribavirin. They are still in use today.

Beginning in 2011, new and better treatment options became available. Instead of having the patient take shots of pegylated interferon for up to 48 weeks and deal with extreme side effects, these new therapies are taken by mouth. In addition, they have minimal side effects, are taken for 12 or 24 weeks, and can actually cure the disease in the majority of HCV patients.

Your doctor will prescribe the best treatment for you based on your situation. Don't be afraid to tell your doctor the truth about your health history. Doctors can help you best when they are aware of all your issues.



Adherence

As always, you should take your medications exactly how and when your doctor prescribed them. This applies to hepatitis C therapies as well. In fact, missing just a few doses or taking them late can lead to treatment resistance—which is when a therapy that worked before stops working. This can also reduce how well your body's immune system responds in the future.

Be sure to let your stePS nurse know if you are struggling to remember your therapy. Your nurse can provide some tips on how to stay adherent. Remember that taking your prescription as prescribed may lead to a cure.

Reinfection

Even though you may have completed your therapy, there is no long-lasting immunity to hepatitis C, so you can get re-infected with it if you are exposed again.¹ There are ways that you can reduce your exposure:

- **Practice safe sex.** The risk of passing hepatitis C to a sex partner is low, but it is still possible.
- **Practice good hygiene.** Do not share personal items that might have blood on them. This includes toothbrushes and razors.
- **Cover open wounds.** Protect any cuts or sores on your skin with bandages or gauze.
- **Do not donate blood.** Even after completing treatment, if you have ever tested positive for hepatitis B or C, you are not eligible to give blood (American Red Cross, 2016).

Close contact is OK. Hepatitis C is not spread by sneezing, hugging, holding hands, coughing, sharing utensils, or through food.

Nutritional education

Healthy eating habits are really important when you have hepatitis C. Avoid drinking alcohol. Alcohol is toxic to anyone's liver, but it's especially harmful for people with hepatitis C. It makes your liver work harder than usual, which puts your body under great strain. Drinking too much can bring on cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics provides the following recommendations for patients with hepatitis:

- The liver helps your body digest and store nutrients from food.
- When you have a chronic infection, such as hepatitis, your body can't use the food as well as it would when healthy.
- You may not feel like eating as much as you used to, or your body may not tolerate foods that you used to eat.
- You may also have symptoms from the liver disease that make eating enough food more difficult.

Note:

- If you have symptoms of liver disease or need to lose weight, your doctor may advise you to cut back on sodium, fluid, protein, fat, or sugars.
- If that is the case, these recommendations are **not** meant for you.
- Talk to a registered dietitian or your doctor about finding an eating plan that fits your needs.
- The right nutrition therapy can help fight your infection and support your recovery.



¹ After Being Cured...Can Hep C Return? Hepatitis Central. Found at: www.hepatitiscentral.com/news/after-being-cured-can-hep-c-return/. Accessed May 31, 2016.

General Guidelines

- Eat enough to get the calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals that your body needs.
- Weigh yourself at least once a week.
 - If your weight doesn't change, you are probably getting enough calories.
- You may feel better, be more comfortable, and stay stronger if you eat 4 or 6 small meals per day, instead of three larger ones.
 - Each day, try to eat at least three meals and a snack.
 - Have a regular eating schedule, with a meal or snack every few hours. This will help your body process food effectively.
- You may need to take extra vitamins and minerals, such as a one-a-day vitamin. Ask your doctor or registered dietitian about the supplement that is best for you.

Recommended Foods

Follow a well-balanced eating plan with foods from each food group.

If you have trouble eating enough, choose foods that are high in calories and nutrients. For example, you may choose:

- Beverages such as milk, juice, fruit-flavored beverages, nutrition supplement drinks, hot cocoa, regular (not diet) soft drinks.
- High-fat foods: You can drink whole milk or add butter, margarine, oil, or salad dressing to foods.
- Carbohydrate foods that are high in calories, such as canned fruit in heavy syrup or desserts.

Between meals, enjoy healthy snacks. Good choices include:

- Fresh, frozen, or canned fruit or fruit juice
- Raw vegetables with dip or salad dressing
- Milk, yogurt, pudding, cheese
- Cereal, crackers, bagels, bread
- Roasted nuts and peanut butter
- Liquid high-calorie supplements such as Boost or Ensure.

Foods Not Recommended

If you have difficulty eating enough, avoid foods that are low in calories and healthy nutrients. For example, you should limit:

- Water, sports drinks, and diet beverages
- Diet foods, low-carbohydrate foods, and reduced-calorie foods
- Fat-free and very-low-fat foods, such as fat-free cookies

Protect yourself against foodborne illnesses. Avoid:

- Unpasteurized or raw milk, cheese, yogurt, and all other milk products
- Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, fish, game, seafood, and raw tofu
- Raw or undercooked eggs and foods which might contain them
- Unwashed fresh fruits and vegetables
- Unpasteurized fruit and vegetable juices and cider
- All raw vegetables sprouts (alfalfa, radish, broccoli, mung bean)



Meal	Menu
Breakfast	½ cup oatmeal with brown sugar, raisins, and cinnamon 1 cup milk 1 slice whole wheat toast with margarine and jam ½ cup orange juice
Midmorning snack (optional)	6 ounces yogurt with 2 tablespoons granola
Lunch	1 cup chicken noodle soup Sliced turkey and Havarti cheese on whole wheat bread 3 or 4 baby carrots Sliced banana and oranges 1 cup milk
Midafternoon snack (optional)	1 cup liquid high-calorie supplement (such as Boost or Ensure) Whole wheat crackers
Evening Meal	4 ounces pork tenderloin 1 small baked sweet potato with 2 teaspoons margarine ½ cup stir-fried broccoli, pea pods, onion, and mushrooms ½ cup mixed fresh fruit
Bedtime snack	½ cup pudding 3 or 4 cookies



Exercise

Physical exercise is extremely important if you have hepatitis C. The heavier you are, the harder your organs have to work, including your liver. Extra weight can also lead to diabetes and increase the number of fat cells in the liver, which can lead to more complications of fatty liver disease and liver damage. These conditions can worsen a liver with hepatitis C.

Many hepatitis C treatments have side effects of fatigue and depression. Exercise can help with these symptoms and help you sleep better.

Studies have not been done to see if one exercise is more helpful than another; however, the recommendations are the same as for the general public:

- At least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity most days of the week
- Muscle-strengthening activities at least two days a week (Farrokh Sohrabi, MD, 2014)

Be sure to speak with your doctor before starting any new exercise plan.

Resources:

American Red Cross, 2016

CDC, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016

Farrokh Sohrabi, MD, 2014

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