

# Hepatitis C

## Coping with Hepatitis C: Diet and Nutrition



You may feel that you cannot control many things about your hepatitis C infection. But you can control what you eat and drink, and how much. Good nutrition is an important part of your wellness plan. Healthy food and drinks give your body the energy it needs to work well. Eating well can also help decrease some of the symptoms of your hepatitis C infection, like feeling tired and sick.

### HELP IS ON THE WAY...

This handout tells you how eating well may help you feel better if you have hepatitis C infection. In general, the best diet for people with the hepatitis C virus is one that includes a variety of healthy foods. If you need more specific information, or if you have nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea, speak with your VA health care provider. Your health care provider can give you suggestions that are specific to your own needs. If necessary, your health care provider can refer you to a dietician or nutritionist.

**IF YOU MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES, GOOD NUTRITION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE. HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR HEALTHY EATING AND DRINKING.**

#### ◆ Don't drink alcohol

Alcohol can lead to serious liver damage in people with hepatitis. Alcohol is a direct toxin (*poison*) to your liver. It prevents your body from absorbing certain vitamins that it needs to work properly. Alcohol can also make your hepatitis C medicines less effective.

If you feel that you cannot stop drinking, or feel that you may have a drinking problem, talk with your health care provider. VA has programs to help you stop drinking.

#### ◆ Avoid crash diets and/or binges

If your goal is to *lose weight*, you should learn healthy ways to decrease the amount of calories you eat. Exercise is another important part of losing weight and it may also lessen some of the unpleasant side effects of hepatitis C treatment. Your doctor or nutritionist can help find a diet and exercise plan that is right for you.

If your goal is to *gain weight*, you should continue to eat a variety of healthy foods. You may need to eat more snacks between meals and more calories per day. Your doctor may be able to refer you to a nutritionist who can help you learn more about good food choices and combinations.

Avoid over-the-counter appetite suppressants or herbal medicines to lose weight. These may actually damage your liver.

◆ **Educate yourself**

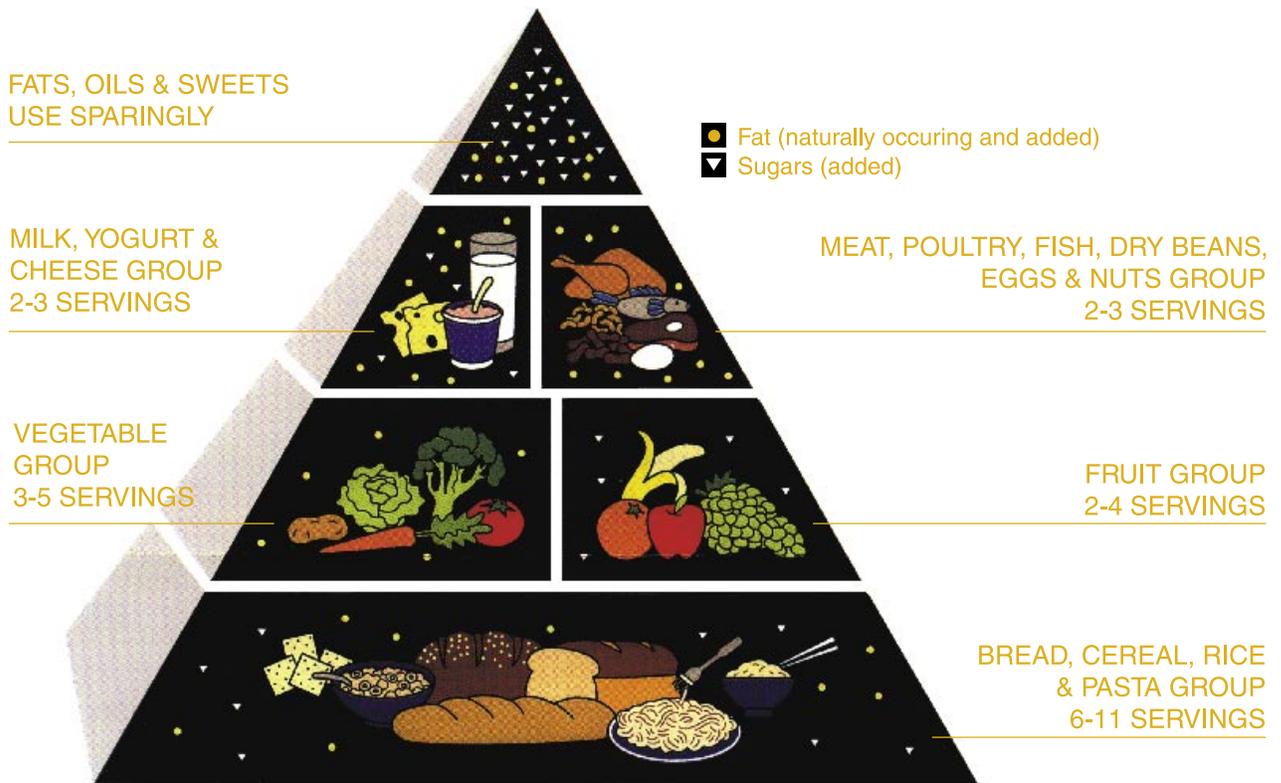
Learning healthy eating habits takes time and practice. The USDA Food Guide Pyramid gives you some basic rules for choosing a balanced diet. Learn how to read labels on food packages.

Foods we think are healthy, such as canned vegetables, may contain more sodium or calories than we need. Your health care provider or nutritionist can help you to understand food labels better.

◆ **Eat a variety of foods**

The food pyramid gives you a picture of the different food choices in each group. If you eat a variety of foods, you will be more likely to get the vitamins and minerals that your body needs to function at its best. Sometimes nausea, vomiting, or loss of appetite can make it hard for you to get the nutrients that you need. Talk with your health care provider or nutritionist to see if a vitamin supplement might help you.

Do not take vitamin or mineral supplements until you check with your health care provider. You may not need a vitamin supplement and some vitamin supplements could damage your liver.



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

### ◆ Fluids

Drink plenty of water. If you are not on a fluid restriction diet, try to drink eight to 12 full glasses a day. If you vomit a lot, you should drink more clear liquids. Don't drink too many things that may dehydrate you, such as drinks that have a lot of caffeine, alcohol, or sugar.

If you want to give your water a twist, try it with a slice of lemon and a teaspoon of honey.

### ◆ Overcoming barriers to eating well

Hepatitis C and its treatment can make it hard to eat well. *Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and loss of appetite* can make you feel like not eating. Here are a few suggestions that may help lessen these side effects:

#### ~ Learn your triggers.

The smell, taste, and even the thought of some foods may make you feel worse. Learn to recognize those foods and stay away from them.

#### ~ Keep a journal of foods you eat.

Write down which foods make you feel better or worse. This can also help you to keep track of both the calories and nutrients that you are getting each day.

#### ~ Try to eat small, healthy meals.

Frequent, yet small meals may be easier for you to digest and may decrease feelings of bloating or fullness.

#### ~ Try not to eat greasy or fatty foods.

These may upset your stomach. Try baking your favorite foods instead of frying them.

#### ~ Do not buy unhealthy foods.

It will be easier to resist eating these foods if they are not in your house.

#### ~ If you feel nauseous, eat foods that make your stomach feel better.

These may include crackers, toast, and mild carbonated drinks, such as ginger ale. If you feel nauseous when you first get up in the morning, keep these food/beverages by your bed. It may help to eat them before you get up.

#### ~ Eat regularly even if you are not very hungry.

If you have cirrhosis (or *scarring of the liver*), speak with your health care provider. You may need to make specific changes to your diet, such as eating less protein, salt, or iron, or drinking less fluids. Always check with your doctor before you start a new exercise or diet program.



***Where can I get more information on diet and nutrition?***

Write the U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion at  
1120 20th Street, NW, Suite 200  
North Lobby Washington, DC 20036  
or visit the Web site at [www.usda.gov/cnpp](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp)

***Who can I contact for more information?***

Call your local VA medical center and visit the  
Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at  
<http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and  
Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free  
Information Line at 1-888-4-HEPCDC  
(1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at  
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>



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*Public Health Strategic Health Care Group (13B)  
Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420  
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