

Hepatitis C

While You Are on Hepatitis C Treatment

Treatment Series: Part II

What should I know about treatment?

Below are some important things to know about treatment for hepatitis C:

◆ **You may have side effects**

Side effects will vary depending on what medicine you take for hepatitis C. Most patients on hepatitis C treatment have side effects, such as fatigue and flu-like symptoms. Some side effects go away and some of them last for the whole time you are treated.

◆ **Your treatment time may vary**

If you are on standard hepatitis C treatments, you will take them for 24 or 48 weeks. If you have too many side effects, or if the drugs don't seem to work for you, your doctor may suggest that you stop a little earlier than usual. After you finish taking the drugs, your doctor will usually follow your progress for six months.

If you are in a clinical trial, you may take the medicine for only a month or for over a year. It depends on the kind of clinical trial and what type of medicine you are taking.

◆ **You will have several lab tests while you are on the medicine**

These lab tests are to make sure that the drugs are safe for you and also to find out if the treatment is working.



◆ **Your doctor will give you instructions**

Your doctor will give you instructions before you start treatment. It is important that you understand the risks and side effects of the drugs. For example, ribavirin can cause serious birth defects, and you or your partner should NOT get pregnant while taking it. If you start taking ribavirin to treat your hepatitis C, you must use two effective forms of birth control, one for you and one for your partner. An example is a condom for the man, and a diaphragm or birth control pill for the woman. You must keep using this type of birth control during the whole time you are on combination treatment and for six months *after* your last dose.

What lab tests will my doctor order to see if treatment is working?

Two blood tests that doctors use frequently to see if treatment is working:

◆ **ALT level (Alanine aminotransferase)**

This test measures the amount (or *level*) of an enzyme called ALT that is made in liver cells. If liver cells are damaged or die, ALT leaks out into the bloodstream. One goal of treatment is to bring high levels of ALT back to normal. If the treatment is working, ALT levels should come down to normal. If the ALT level decreases quickly in the treatment process, you have a better chance of responding to treatment.

◆ **Viral load (hepatitis C virus ribonucleic acid level or hepatitis C RNA level)**

This test measures the amount of hepatitis C virus in your blood. Treatment for hepatitis C tries to keep the viral load low or negative (*undetectable*). Undetectable means that no virus was found in your blood by the test used. Your doctor will check your viral load at different times during treatment.

How often will my doctor check my blood to see if treatment is working?

Doctors often take blood at certain time points to see if treatment is working. The most common tests look at your viral load and ALT levels. These *checkpoints* usually happen at the following times:

◆ **Week 1 or 2**

This is the first safety check to see how you are tolerating treatment.

◆ **Week 12**

If your viral load has decreased a lot, or become undetectable by Week 12, you have a better chance at *sustained response*. Sustained response means that treatment worked while you were taking the medicine and seemed to work even after you stopped taking it. The earlier you respond, the more likely it is that the treatment will fully work for you.

◆ **Week 24**

If your viral load is negative at Week 24, you will have a better chance of sustained response. If you still have detectable virus at this point, you have a very small

chance of clearing it from your system. If the ALT is also still high, you and your doctor may want to consider stopping treatment.

If your ALT level is normal, your doctor may keep you on treatment even if the virus is still present. Most studies have shown that if the treatment hasn't started to work by this checkpoint, it may not be right for you to continue.

◆ **Week 48**

If your viral load is negative, then you have a fairly good chance of showing a sustained response. If your virus is positive at the end of treatment, it is extremely rare to clear the virus once treatment has ended.

◆ **Week 72**

If your viral load is negative at Week 72 (or *six months after the end of treatment*), you are a sustained responder (*there is a very small chance that the virus will reappear in your system*). If the virus has come back, you are considered a *relapser*. This means that once the treatment stopped, the virus came back.

What other tests are important to know about while I'm on treatment?

Besides the ALT level and viral load, your doctor will also look at many other tests. Some of the most important tests look at your white blood cells, which may be affected by interferon treatment. If your white blood cells drop below a certain level, your doctor may change your interferon dose. Your doctor will also

look at your red blood cells, which may be affected by ribavirin. If your red blood cells and hemoglobin levels drop below a certain point, your doctor may change your ribavirin dose.

Will I be able to work while I'm on treatment?

Some patients keep a normal work schedule while they are on treatment. Others may have to cut down their work hours or stop working altogether. The side effects are different for every patient, so it is hard to say how much hepatitis C treatment will affect your work schedule.

Will I have to take other medicines to help with my side effects?

You may not need any other medicines to help with your side effects. But if you have too many side effects, or they cause problems for you, your doctor may prescribe some extra drugs. These may include drugs to help you sleep better or to control skin itching caused by treatment. For more advice on how to manage side effects, speak with your doctor or nurse.

Will I need a liver biopsy during treatment?

Sometimes your doctor may ask you to have a liver biopsy *before* you start treatment or *after* treatment is finished. It is not likely that you will have a liver biopsy *during* the course of treatment.

Your liver may be healthier after treatment, showing less inflammation on a biopsy. So even if you haven't cleared the virus, a healthier liver is in itself a good benefit of treatment. Talk with your doctor and family to decide if you need a liver biopsy after treatment.

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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