

# Hepatitis C

## Do You Know a Veteran Who Is Being Treated for Hepatitis C?

### **What do the treatments try to do?**

Treatments for hepatitis C try to

- remove (or *clear*) all the hepatitis C virus from the body
- slow or stop damage to the liver
- help someone who has hepatitis C to feel better

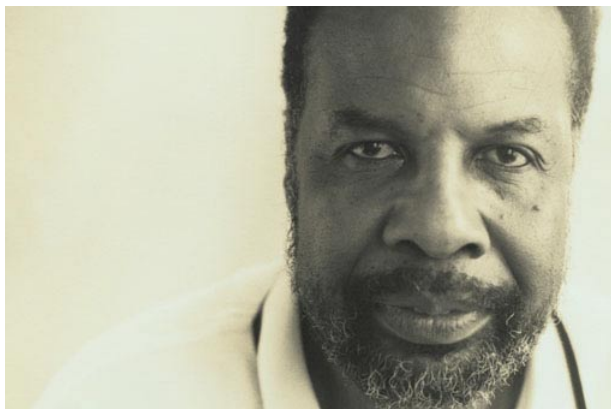
### **What treatments are there for people with hepatitis C?**

Treatments are usually medicines (or *drugs*). Before a doctor can prescribe a drug for hepatitis C, it has to be approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Three drugs that have been approved by the FDA are

- regular interferon alone (called *interferon monotherapy*)
- long-acting interferon (called *pegylated interferon therapy*)
- interferon combined with ribavirin (called *combination therapy*)

### **How are the medicines given?**

Interferon is given as a shot. Most people who take interferon give themselves one shot a week. Ribavirin is taken by mouth in a pill or capsule.



### **Do people who take medicines for hepatitis C have side effects?**

Most people who take medicine for hepatitis C do have side effects. The side effects can be mild, moderate, or severe. Side effects may include any of the following:

- Feeling tired
- Having a fever and chills
- Feeling sick to your stomach (called *nausea*) or vomiting
- Not feeling hungry or not eating as much as usual
- Feeling anxious, depressed, or moody
- Having headaches or muscle aches
- Losing your hair
- Not being able to sleep (called *insomnia*)
- Having dry, itchy skin or a rash
- Having problems with thyroid disease or diabetes
- Having shortness of breath
- Having chest pain

**Remind the person who is taking medicine for hepatitis C to tell his or her doctor about ALL side effects.**

### **What are some of the ways to lessen the side effects of treatment?**

Doctors and nurses will give people information on how to lessen the side effects of the drugs. This advice might include some of the following:

- Drink plenty of liquids.
- Do not drink alcohol or drinks that have caffeine or lots of sugar.

- Get plenty of sleep at night or take short naps during the day.
- Eat small, nutritious meals.
- Exercise regularly.
- Take the medicine before bed to sleep through some of the unpleasant side effects.
- Take certain pain relievers suggested by the doctor.
- Stay away from things that make the side effects worse (called *triggers*) like loud noises, bright lights, and strong smells.
- Do not use strong detergents or soaps that might irritate the skin.
- Use simple, unscented lotions to help dry and itchy skin.

### **How does the doctor know if the treatment is working?**

Doctors often do blood tests before, during, and after treatment for hepatitis C. They check for things like:

#### ■ **ALT (alanine aminotransferase) level**

This test measures the amount (or *level*) of an enzyme made in liver cells. If liver cells are damaged, ALT leaks out into the bloodstream. Higher ALT levels mean more liver damage. A goal of treatment is to lower (or *normalize*) ALT levels. If the ALT level was high before treatment, the doctor will often check during treatment to see if the level has come back to normal.

#### ■ **“HCV viral load” or HCV-RNA level**

This test measures the amount of virus in the blood. Treatment for hepatitis C tries to keep the viral load low or negative (or *undetectable*). If tests show that the viral load is negative, this means that some virus may

still be in the blood, but there is such a small amount that it cannot be found (or *detected*) by the test used. The viral load will be checked at different times during treatment to see if the level goes down.

### **My partner is taking combination therapy for hepatitis C. Are there any special risks I should know about?**

**YES!** For example, ribavirin can cause severe birth defects, and you and your sexual partner should NOT get pregnant while you are taking it. If your partner is taking ribavirin for hepatitis C, you must use two good forms of birth control, one for you and one for your partner. For example, the man uses a condom, *and* the woman uses a diaphragm or birth control pill. You must keep using this type of birth control for six months *after* the last dose of combination treatment. Ask your doctor or your partner’s doctor for more information.

### **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 HEP CDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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