

Hepatitis C

Common Questions About Finishing Hepatitis C Treatment

Treatment Series: Part III

What should I know after I finish my hepatitis C treatment?

When you finish your treatment, your doctor will give you advice based on the type of drugs you took and whether they worked. This handout contains suggestions on what you should do after you have finished your treatment. Talk with your doctor if you have any questions about hepatitis C or the treatments you took.



What should I do if my treatment didn't clear the virus from my blood?

If you have finished your treatment and it did not clear the hepatitis C virus from your blood, you may want to take a break for a while or you may want to try another drug soon. Your decision will depend on several things, such as the results of your liver function tests and biopsy. Some people with less severe liver damage decide to wait until better treatments are tested and become available. Other people decide to try new drugs right away. Keep in mind that even if the treatment didn't get rid of the virus, it may have improved the health of your liver.

What other kinds of treatment are being made?

Treatments for hepatitis C are changing, and new drugs are always being tested. But even after a new drug has been tested in clinical trials, it may take years before it gets the approval of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

There are also several new types of treatments that try to clear the virus or decrease the amount of liver damage. These new treatments work in different ways and may do the following things:

- Fight hepatitis C much like ribavirin does, but without causing anemia.
- Work with your body to naturally produce more interferon.
- Stop the virus from reproducing.
- Decrease the amount of liver injury.

If treatment didn't clear the virus from my blood, are there any herbal remedies that I can take?

Before you take herbs or any other medicine to treat your hepatitis C virus infection, talk to your doctor. Many herbs have not been carefully tested and may cause damage to your liver. In general, we don't know if certain herbs really work to help patients with hepatitis C.

For more information, please see the handout *Coping with Hepatitis C: Alternative Treatments*.

If my viral test was negative six months at the end of treatment, will I stay negative?

Treatment for hepatitis C hasn't been available for very long, so doctors are just starting to understand the long-term effects. But studies show that if your viral load was negative six months after treatment, there is a good chance that it won't come back. Doctors don't yet

call this a *cure*. They call it *remission* instead. A cure means that the virus will never come back. Remission means that the virus is not detectable now, and it is not known if it will come back in the future. The good news is that patients who cleared the virus on interferon treatment are still showing negative viral loads, up to 10 years after the end of treatment.

If you tried any of these treatments:

- Interferon Monotherapy
- Combination Therapy (Ribavirin & Interferon)
- Pegylated Interferon Monotherapy
- Pegylated Interferon combined with Ribavirin
- Other type of treatment

If the virus was cleared from your blood:

- Ask for liver function tests every six months or every year.
- Ask your doctor about a test for viral load if your liver test becomes abnormal.
- It is likely that you will stay virus free for at least three to five years.
- It is likely that the hepatitis C virus is no longer in your blood.
- Keep yourself healthy by
 - ~ eating well
 - ~ not drinking alcohol or using drugs
 - ~ getting plenty of rest
 - ~ staying active and exercising
- Keep your appointments with your doctor and get regular checkups.

If the virus is still in your blood:

- Talk with your doctor about other treatments.
- Ask for liver function tests every six months or every year.
- Think about having a liver biopsy every few years to check your liver's health.
- Ask about new clinical trials for hepatitis C treatments.
- Talk with your doctor about tests for liver cancer if you have scarring of the liver (*cirrhosis*).
- Keep yourself healthy by
 - ~ eating well
 - ~ not drinking alcohol or using drugs
 - ~ getting plenty of rest
 - ~ staying active and exercising
- Keep your appointments with your doctor and get regular checkups.

Final Suggestions

Everyone has a slightly different experience with hepatitis C treatments. Side effects are different for everyone, and doctors can never predict how well a drug will work for a certain person. It always helps to know as much as you can and to keep yourself healthy by eating well, getting plenty of rest, and not using alcohol or drugs that can damage your liver.

At all stages – before, during, and after treatment – talk with your doctor or nurse to learn as much as possible about your disease and your treatment. Your doctor will give you advice after you finish treatment. You must understand that the risks and side effects of treatment may last even after you have finished treatment. For example, ribavirin can cause serious birth defects, so you or your partner should NOT get pregnant while on combination treatment and for six months *after* your last dose. You must practice two effective forms of birth control, one for you and one for your partner (an example is a condom, plus a diaphragm or birth control pill).

Try to find health care providers who know about hepatitis C and can give you up-to-date information and advice. With support from your family, friends, and a doctor that you trust, you can have a better treatment

experience. If you have tried a treatment that didn't work, don't be discouraged. Every day new and better treatments are becoming available as we learn more about hepatitis C.

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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