

Hepatitis C Treatment Challenges for People in Drug and Alcohol Recovery

This handout addresses some specific challenges that people in recovery might face during treatment for hepatitis C infection.

Why is treatment for hepatitis C infection challenging?

Currently, combination therapy is the most effective treatment for hepatitis C. Combination therapy is when you take more than one medicine. Patients who are on combination therapy for hepatitis C take both ribavirin and interferon.

- Ribavirin comes in a pill that you swallow.
- Interferon is given as an injection (or *shot*).

Both interferon and ribavirin can cause side effects. In addition, since interferon is given as an injection, it may be uncomfortable for some people, especially people who are in recovery for injection drug use.

What are some of the side effects of hepatitis C treatment?

Some of the side effects may include the following:

- Feeling tired;
- Having a fever and chills;
- Feeling sick to your stomach (or *nausea*) or vomiting;
- Not feeling hungry or eating less than usual;
- Feeling anxious, irritable, or depressed;
- Having headaches and muscle aches;

- Losing your hair;
- Not being able to sleep (or *insomnia*);
- Having dry, itchy and/or irritated skin, or rash;
- Having problems with thyroid disease or diabetes;
- Having shortness of breath;
- Having chest pain.

How can I manage the side effects of my treatment?

Many people have a difficult time with the side effects of hepatitis C treatment. If you experience any of these side effects, talk to your doctor. Your doctor will be able to give you suggestions on how to deal with the side effects. Your doctor may also suggest prescription drugs to lessen your side effects and make you feel better.

If you feel that taking medicine for the side effects of anxiety, irritability, or depression contradicts your recovery program, speak with your doctor and support people. Some recovering addicts practice total abstinence from drugs that may alter mood or feelings. This may include medicines that your doctor



might prescribe for interferon side effects, such as depression, anxiety, or irritability. Taking medicine for these side effects may not be right for you.

Learning how to deal with the side effects of your hepatitis C treatments can take time. Talk to your friends or support people about the side effects you are experiencing. You may find that people in your own recovery program are coping with hepatitis C and may also be on treatment.

Important Note

If you were prescribed medicines for a mental or emotional disorder prior to starting hepatitis C treatment, you should not skip or change the doses of your medicines without speaking with your doctor first.

What do others in recovery say about hepatitis C treatment?

The following people talk about how they deal with their recovery and the side effects of hepatitis C treatment:



The side effects from the interferon injections are similar to those of heroin withdrawal...the fever, the hot/itchy skin, and aching muscles and joints. For me, an attitude of gratitude has helped me immensely. I remind myself that I am taking treatment so I can have a normal life. I go to meetings.

(Ted, hepatitis C-positive person in recovery)

I was really having a hard time with the treatment. I was having a really bad depression. I couldn't even get out of bed in the morning. I talked to my doctor and he prescribed a medication for my depression. It has made it easier for me to deal with my treatment and focus on my recovery.

(Mark, hepatitis C-positive person in recovery)

I experience some depression on my therapy, but I feel that taking antidepressants contradicts my program. I take my commitment to NA's philosophy of total abstinence very seriously. Taking the side effects of hepatitis C therapy day-by-day helps me through some of the dark periods.

(Matt, hepatitis C-positive person in recovery)

I know a lot of people who are in my program with hepatitis C infection. I have talked to many members of my fellowship for support and advice on this disease.

(Pat, hepatitis C-positive person in recovery)

What are some other ways of dealing with the side effects?

Here are some other suggestions for dealing with the side effects of hepatitis C treatment:

- Talk with your doctor or nurse about whether you would benefit from talking with a social worker, psychologist, or other mental health professional to help you cope with the side effects of your hepatitis C treatment and your recovery.
- Talk openly about your feelings with your sponsor, fellowship, a family member, friend, or someone else you trust.
- Tell people close to you that you are taking medicine to treat hepatitis C that may affect your moods.
- Join a support group for people with liver disease.
- Avoid people, places, or things (called *triggers*) that can make you feel stressed.
- Try to avoid too much caffeine, sugar, and tobacco.
- Learn ways to relax. Meditate or breathe quietly. Go for a walk or do some other light exercise.
- Take care of your body. Eat healthy meals, get lots of sleep, and drink plenty of water.
- Talk with your doctor about other ways to deal with the side effects that may be appropriate for you.

Will the act of injecting interferon bring up old memories?

Sometimes, the act of injecting interferon can bring up memories and feelings of your 'using' days. It might be difficult for you. Here are some tips to make taking interferon easier on you:

- ~ **Remind yourself that interferon is working to heal your liver from the damage caused by hepatitis C.**
- ~ **Try not to isolate yourself while injecting interferon.**
It may be helpful to inject interferon around people you trust, such as family members.
- ~ **Talk openly about your feelings of injecting interferon with your sponsor, fellowship, and other people you trust.**
- ~ **Remind yourself that being clean and sober is the best thing you can do to keep yourself healthy when you have hepatitis C.**
- ~ **Get help managing side effects.**
Remember to talk with your doctor if you are experiencing any side effects from your hepatitis C treatment.
- ~ **Don't skip or change doses of interferon.**
Try to make the injections part of your schedule and routine.

Where can I get more information on drug and alcohol dependency programs?

Write to Alcoholics Anonymous
AA General Service Office at
475 Riverside Drive, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10115
and visit the Web site at
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Write to Narcotics Anonymous
World Service Office in Los Angeles at
P.O. Box 9999
Van Nuys, CA 91409
and visit the Web site at www.na.org

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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