

Hep C factsheets

Dealing with symptoms



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Introduction

Please note that most of the symptoms detailed in this factsheet can be caused by illnesses other than hep C. This information should not be used as a self-diagnosis tool or to replace the advice of qualified health care professionals. This factsheet does not specifically address the side-effects that can be caused by hep C treatment.

This factsheet identifies some of the more common symptoms experienced by people with hep C and provides some suggestions for relieving the symptoms. People with chronic hep C can experience a range of symptoms and they vary in severity from none at all, to very mild and non-specific, to being quite severe. Symptoms caused by chronic hep C may occur in isolation or in clusters. The severity of symptoms does not reflect the degree of damage to the liver or amount of virus in the body. Some symptoms can be attributed to hep C when there may be other unrelated causes, and some symptoms can be attributed to other reasons when in fact the hep C is the cause.

People with hep C are encouraged to discuss their full range of symptoms with a doctor to identify what the causes may be and to explore treatment options. Complementary and alternative therapies can assist some people to manage symptoms – a qualified practitioner should be consulted and people should inform their doctor of additional therapies they may be taking.

Flu-like symptoms

People with hep C can experience periodic flu-like symptoms that usually last a few days to a week, and occasionally longer. The most common symptoms are fever, chills, headaches, fatigue, and muscle aches.

Suggestions

- Fevers may be treated with anti-pyretic (anti-fever) medication (such as paracetamol) and muscle or joint aches with anti-inflammatory medication (usually only required for a few days as symptoms come and go). Follow the manufacturer's directions and consult with a doctor because some medications can impact the liver.
- Some herbal products such as herbal teas (yarrow, elder and peppermint teas) may help some people to feel better

Fatigue and sleep disturbances

Fatigue can be described as a sense of excessive tiredness and lack of energy. The majority of people who have chronic hep C may experience fatigue at some stage, although periods of extreme tiredness can also relate to stress, a busy lifestyle or other health factors. Problems with sleeping vary widely for people who have hep C and can include difficulty falling asleep, waking up a lot, insomnia, or sleeping excessive amounts. Sleep disturbances are common among the general population and it is often difficult to ascertain what impact hep C and its associated symptoms may be having on a person's sleeping patterns. Sleep problems do have an impact on a person's quality of life and can exacerbate other symptoms of hep C, especially fatigue.

Suggestions

- It is recommended that people who have hep C eat a well-balanced diet that is low in fat, drink alcohol in moderation or not at all, have regular mild exercise, and stop or reduce smoking.
- Short naps during the day may help, though excessive sleep can cause people to feel more tired and could cause sleep difficulties at night. Eight hours sleep per day is generally enough for an adult, although individual needs will vary, and it can help to set specific sleep times to try to regulate the body clock.
- Try to avoid over-commitment with day-to-day activities and avoid exercising just before sleeping
- Plan the days activities around times that tiredness and fatigue normally appear. When energy is higher complete extra tasks (e.g. cook food in batches and freeze to eat later)
- Minimise caffeine in the afternoon, particularly if sleep is difficult
- Eating small, regular meals may help to regulate energy levels
- Jasmine tea, camomile tea, lavender scent and warm milk may help to relax people and assist with sleep
- Occasional use of sleeping sedatives may assist, however people are encouraged to consult their doctor first

Mood swings, anxiety and depression

Symptoms can include feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, irritability, lack of interest in your usual activities and extended periods of sadness and/or despair. These feelings may also be caused by issues unrelated to hep C.

Suggestions

- Depression is nothing to be ashamed of, and it can be treated. Talk with a health professional such as a counsellor or doctor. There are possible treatments for anxiety and depression such as counselling, medication, relaxation activities, support groups, and self-help books.
- Consider gentle exercise such as a daily walk, yoga, massage or scheduling regular relaxation times. Gentle physical activities can help to lift a persons mood.

'Brain fog' and cognitive changes

Cognitive ability refers to a persons ability to think clearly and to concentrate. Some people with hep C notice they have a deterioration in their cognitive ability. A person may find they cannot concentrate for long periods of time, or may notice that their thought processes seem slower than usual. They may have difficulty coming up with words they want to say, or may just feel mentally tired. These cognitive changes are sometimes called 'brain fog'. Like other symptoms of hep C, cognitive changes can come and go.

These symptoms can be caused by other things unrelated to hep C, including depression and anxiety.

Suggestions

- Make lists and work through them and give yourself more time to complete tasks
- Discuss important decisions with someone you trust
- Discuss the symptoms with a health professional such as a counsellor or doctor

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Pain or discomfort of the liver

People with hep C may experience episodes of abdominal pain. Pain or soreness on the right side just below the ribs could be from the liver.

Suggestions

- Discuss the symptoms and pain management with a doctor before attempting to treat
- Pain relief medication, both over-the-counter and on prescription, is generally considered acceptable for temporarily treating liver pain
- Reducing alcohol consumption to below levels recommended for the general community, or abstaining from alcohol altogether, may bring relief
- Using a heat pack over the liver, particularly at night, may relieve liver pain or discomfort

Muscle and joint pain

Common sites of joint pain are the hips, knees, fingers, and spine, although any joint can be a source of pain. Pain associated with hep C can be migratory, meaning it can move around. Aches and pains in the muscles are usually experienced as a generalised feeling. However, some people report having pain in only one area of the body. This symptom tends to come and go, and is rarely present all of the time.

Suggestions

- It is generally considered acceptable to take anti-inflammatory medication for muscle and joint pain. Follow the manufacturer's directions and consult with a doctor.
- Mild physical activity increases blood flow to joints and muscles and can reduce stiffness
- Heat packs on the sore area, warm baths and massage may provide temporary relief

- Some people find benefit in complementary and alternative therapies, such as herbal products or massage
- Glucosamine sulphate or MSM Joint Food Powders may help reduce joint pain, improve mobility and flexibility

Nausea (feeling sick), poor appetite and indigestion

Hep C may cause episodes of nausea which can affect appetite. Although it is usually not accompanied by vomiting, it can be a very uncomfortable and debilitating symptom. Many people find they do not feel well after having fatty foods or alcohol. For some, foods that are at room temperature or cold are more appealing than hot foods.

Suggestions

- Avoid having an empty stomach. Eat smaller meals more frequently and avoid eating large or high-fat meals
- Avoid drinking fluids during meals and drink after meals when feeling better
- Do not lie down immediately or within 30 minutes of eating
- Avoid cooking odours or use pre-prepared food if assistance with meal preparation is not available
- Nausea may be reduced by having fresh ginger, ginger tablets, ginger beer or ginger tea (add lemon to enhance the flavour)
- Eat bitter foods before main meals to improve digestion (e.g. olives, rocket lettuce)
- Acidophilus yoghurt, vitamin B6 or camomile tea may help to reduce nausea
- If nausea persists and is not addressed by other measures a doctor may be able to help

Fevers and night sweats

Many people with hep C periodically experience fevers which may occur while sleeping. The fevers are usually low, typically less than 38.3 degrees. As the fever reduces people may experience chills and sweating.

Suggestions

- Fevers may be treated effectively by taking an anti-pyretic medication (such as paracetamol) before bed. Follow the manufacturer's directions and consult with a doctor.
- Some people have found relief from night sweats using herbal preparations - consult with a complementary therapist or doctor
- Change nightclothes if they get damp from sweat. Keep extra nightclothes by the bedside to enable quick changes in the night without having to wake fully to look for dry clothes. Try wearing pure cotton nightwear.

Skin rashes, itchy skin, PCT, LP

Pruritus is the medical word for itching. Often, it is limited to the palms of the hands and/or the soles of the feet. However, some people may itch all over. Skin rashes and other skin (dermatological) complaints may come and go. Some skin problems may be given the clinical term "PCT" (porphyria cutanea tarda). PCT may include skin rashes, blisters, scarring, pigmentation, milk white spots, and skin tightening. A "spider web" pattern of blood vessels on the skin can occur in people who have liver disease. LP (lichen planus) causes superficial inflammation that leads to itchy flat white and purplish patches on the skin and white patches in the mouth.

Suggestions

- Avoid highly perfumed soaps and shampoos. Sorbolene cream can be used as a substitute for soap when bathing. Use an unperfumed skin moisturiser to reduce skin dryness
- Consider bathing the affected skin in salty water or swimming in the ocean
- Keep the skin cool, avoid hot showers/baths, try to reduce sweating and reduce exposing the skin to the sun

- Speak with a pharmacist/doctor about managing the itching (anti-histamines, particular oils, cortico-steroid creams or bathing products may help)
- Avoid scratching the skin because scratching can increase the itchiness

Dry eyes

Hep C infection can potentially cause dry eyes and the dryness may be due to inflammation of the glands that produce tears.

Suggestions

- Consider eye ointments or eye drops. Ointments last longer and are better to use at night while asleep.
- Avoid smoke, direct wind, and air conditioning
- Consider using a humidifier, particularly in winter
- Deliberately blink more often to moisten the eyes

Dry mouth and mouth ulcers

Hep C infection can potentially cause a dry mouth and the dryness may be due to inflammation of the glands that produce saliva. Dry mouth (xerostomia) can occur when the amount or quality of saliva decreases. Symptoms can include: bad breath, cracked lips, sore mouth and throat, difficulty eating and swallowing which can affect nutrition, mouth ulcers, tooth decay and tooth sensitivity. Suggestions to address dry mouth include..

- Maintaining good oral hygiene with regular brushing and flossing particularly after meals and before bed
- Keeping the mouth moist by sipping water regularly
- Chewing sugar-free gum can stimulate saliva
- Consider using lip balm
- Try pharmacy oral health products that are designed to ease the discomfort of dry mouth. Products include: mouthwash, toothpaste, moisturizer gel, and chewing gum
- Consider rinsing the mouth with salty water and gargling with mild mouthwash

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- Avoid hot or spicy foods, which can irritate a dry mouth
- Choose soft, mashed or minced foods if eating is painful
- Infant's teething gels available from pharmacies may provide some relief from ulcers
- Corticosteroid or chlorhexidine gel/cream may reduce discomfort and aid healing of ulcers
- Visit a dentist twice a year
- Speak with a doctor about the symptoms – there may be a prescription medication that could help

Malaise

Malaise is a general sense of feeling unwell. It is a common symptom reflecting a chronic infection. Symptoms of malaise are generally not treated directly but relief may be found as other issues and symptoms related to the infection are treated.

Other less common symptoms of hep C

Type 2 diabetes (non-insulin dependent) has been found to be associated with people who have liver disease and may be more common in people who have cirrhosis.

Thyroid dysfunction has been found to be associated with liver disease, particularly those undergoing interferon treatment.

Renal/kidney disease (glomerulonephritis) is associated with people who have liver disease. Potential symptoms can be general ill-health with malaise, anaemia, anorexia, nausea, blood in the urine or fluid retention.

Hep C symptoms and hep C treatment

Hep C treatment is an effective way of treating the symptoms caused by hep C as well as potentially providing a cure from the virus. The combination treatment consists of the drugs interferon and ribavirin. It is designed to target the virus itself and a course of therapy lasts for between 6 and 12 months. The side effects of treatment have reduced in the past few years and 50-80% of people who complete the full course of hep C treatment will achieve a permanent cure from the active virus.

Many people who are cured of the active virus report that most of the symptoms related to hep C fade away over time. An additional benefit is that liver damage caused by hep C should not worsen. In fact, the liver will often repair itself. Even if a cure from the virus is not achieved then therapy has usually provided some benefit by reducing the virus amount which consequently can slow the progress of liver damage and reduce symptoms.

For more information about interferon-based treatment people can speak with their GP and liver specialist. Generally, a GP's referral letter is required to make the initial appointment to see a liver specialist and further testing is conducted by the specialist to ascertain if there is a need for treatment.

Also see

Complementary and Alternative Therapies for Hepatitis C (booklet)

Complementary Medicine (factsheet)

Diet and Staying Healthy (factsheet)

Dealing with Fatigue (factsheet)

Dealing with Stress (factsheet)

Hep C Treatment (factsheet)

Painkillers and the Liver (factsheet)

The Guide to Healthy Eating for People with Hepatitis C (booklet)

Thinking About Treatment (booklet)

Treatment Response (factsheet)

Treatment Side-Effects (factsheet)

- This factsheet was developed by the Hepatitis C Council of NSW. It was reviewed by the Hepatitis C Council of NSW Medical and Research Advisory Panel.