

Hep C factsheets

Treatment response



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Introduction

Talking about response, a lot of medical language is used which is quite technical. It is important for people with hep C to understand the meaning of this language so they can monitor their health and participate in making decisions about treatments.

The meanings of several terms used in defining response have changed over time with improvements to treatments and tests. Just a few years ago a relapser was a person whose liver function test results rose back up after treatment finished. Now, the term relapser is not used if the person's treatment was too short or of an ineffective dose or frequency.

Words such as remission and cure also have little or no real meaning unless they are further defined or qualified. Thirty years ago, a person was usually considered cured of hepatitis if their jaundice went away. Today we know that is not true.

Measuring Response

Listed in the following section are the different terms used to define a person's response to treatment (eg. rapid, early, initial, non-response). These responses are measured by two types of blood tests: the PCR (RNA) viral load test or PCR (RNA) viral detection test.

Defining response

There are several different results that can occur during and following a course of treatment:

- **Rapid Viral Response:** viral clearance at week four of treatment. A good sign that shows someone has a higher chance of sustained viral response (see below).
- **Early Viral Response (complete):** viral clearance at week 12 of treatment. A good sign that shows someone has a higher chance of sustained viral response (see below).
- **Early Viral Response (partial):** significant drop in viral load at week 12 of treatment, ie. two log drop in viral load, eg. from 60,000 down to 600.
- **Non-Response:** no significant drop in viral load after twelve weeks of treatment. This means you probably won't be cured.
- **End-of-Treatment Response:** whether or not the virus is detectable in your blood at the end of treatment (either six months or twelve months). This is good but it doesn't mean you are cured.
- **Sustained Viral Response:** viral clearance as proved by a negative PCR result six months or more after treatment finishes. This is the result that people hope for and is what doctors refer to when someone is successfully cured.

Relapse

This implies an initial response of some kind, and then a return to abnormal values. Relapse can be virological, biochemical or histological. It usually implies a return of some symptoms, but not always.

Cure (sustained response)

Cure equates to the term sustained response, ie. where no presence of the virus can be detected immediately after therapy, and for six months afterwards. Research suggests that 99% of these people have cleared the virus from their body.

Current research suggests that response to pegylated combination therapy is related to a person's hep C genotype. People with hep C genotypes 2 or 3 have been shown to have a higher chance of being cured (approx. 80%) than people with genotype 1 (approx. 50%).

It is also becoming clear that the majority of people who experience a sustained response will enjoy a reversal of their underlying liver damage, even from the stage of cirrhosis.

Also see

PCR availability (factsheet)

Hep C treatment (factsheet)

What You Need To Know (booklet)

Also contact *The Hep C Helpline* who can provide further information or discuss peer support services:

9332 1599 (Sydney callers)

1800 803 990 (NSW regional callers)

- Abridged from an internet article by Jere Hough, with assistance of the Hepatitis C Council of NSW Medical & Research Advisory Panel.