

Living with Hepatitis C: Managing Common Symptoms

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Chronic hepatitis C Virus (HCV) is often called a silent disease because the liver can suffer a lot of damage and still function pretty well. There are some common symptoms that most people with a long-term HCV infection have. A study reported in the medical journal, *Hepatology*, gives some tips for how to handle these symptoms¹. These tips are for the average HCV patient whose infection is in the early stages. Before trying any of these ideas, talk to your doctor or nurse. Trying to decide what is best for you on your own may not get you the best possible medical care you need.

Symptoms

Fatigue or feeling tired

- Try to rule out other causes for being tired, such as thyroid problems, diabetes, red blood cell problems (anemia), depression, sleep problems, lack of water (dehydration), etc.
- Make sure you are getting enough sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, the average adult needs 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.
- Drink plenty of water and other healthy liquids (10 to 16 glasses per day) that do not contain sugar or caffeine.
- Exercise regularly to make sure you have enough energy. A ten-minute walk can work wonders, particularly a walk in a pretty setting. Stretching, especially for those who sit behind a desk for hours, can also be helpful.
- Exercise classes that use a series of positions and stretches, such as Pilates, Qigong, Tai Chi, or Yoga can give you more energy.
- Try to get rid of stress in your life. Meditation, massage, watching the sun rise and set can help relax you.
- Keep your life simple. Decide what is and is not important. Don't over do it.
- Look for short cuts. All meals do not have to be made from scratch. A car can be cleaned at a car wash rather than by hand.
- Ask for help. There is nothing wrong with asking your children to empty the dishwasher. Have friends over for a potluck dinner and ask them to help with the dishes.

Muscle and Joint Pain

- Be sure to find out the cause of pain before beginning a self-help program.
- Ask your doctor about using prescription and non-prescription drugs to help with these aches and pains. Many people believe that HCV patients cannot take Tylenol® (acetaminophen). In most cases, Tylenol® is safe if taken once in a while and according to the label directions. *Never* mix Tylenol® and alcohol. If you take other prescriptions or over the counter drugs, ask your doctor about the safety of taking these with Tylenol®.
- Try gentle stretching of your muscles.
- Make sure you stay active.
- Try warm or hot baths. Spoil yourself with a bubble bath.
- Massage and acupressure may be helpful. Both can be learned and applied by you or by a professional.

Headaches

- Talk to your health care provider if you have headaches.
- Ask your doctor about using prescription and non-prescription drugs to help with the headaches.
- Try to get rid of stress.
- Meditation and other relaxing activities can help get rid of headaches.

Dryness

- This includes dry skin, mouth, nose and eyes.
- Be sure to drink plenty of water.
- Lotions for sensitive skin can be applied right after bathing to reduce dry skin. Adding a couple of drops of lightweight oil to the lotion also helps. (Neutrogena sells body oil. Baby oil is another choice.)
- Use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.
- For dry eyes, use over-the-counter teardrops. If you find you need to use drops often, use a preservative-free type.
- Saline nose sprays can help with dry nasal passages.

Stomach Problems

- Experiencing pain in the liver from time to time is common. Talk to your doctor about any GI problems (like upset stomach, diarrhea, etc.) you may have.
- Eat several small meals instead of three large ones.
- Choose low-fat, healthy foods whenever possible.
- Stay away from acidic foods such as tomatoes and oranges.
- See a nutritionist for more information about a healthy diet.

Emotional Concerns

Chronic HCV infection patients often say that they do not feel like themselves and find it hard to function. These feelings can include depression, irritability, trouble sleeping (insomnia), difficulty concentrating and even some confusion. If any of these problems occur, discuss them with your nurse or doctor. It is important to find out if these symptoms are being caused by another condition. Consider trying meditation, moderate exercise, Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga, or stress relief. Do activities that require the most concentration when you are feeling your best. Make sure to do things that you enjoy and make you laugh.

