Reproduction Issues During Treatment

Foreword
There are two main reproduction issues associated with current treatment for hepatitis C virus infection (HCV). One is pregnancy, the other is breastfeeding. It is important to understand these issues before you begin treatment as these will affect you before, during, and after treatment.

Reproduction
When ribavirin was combined with interferon and tested on animals, it was linked to birth defects and fetal death. Because of this, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has strict requirements for companies selling ribavirin. Ribavirin is a category X drug. This means it may cause birth defects or death to a fetus. There are bold warnings printed on all ribavirin labels. Copegus, Rebetol, and Ribasphere are common brand names for ribavirin.

Your doctor or nurse should verify that you are not pregnant immediately before you start treatment. This means taking a pregnancy test. This also holds true if you are the female partner of a man planning to undergo HCV treatment. If you or your partner have the starter kit that accompanies your medication, a urine pregnancy test may be supplied to enable you to do this. If you don’t have a starter kit or a pregnancy test wasn’t provided, you can obtain a test through your doctor or drugstore.

Assuming pregnancy is ruled out, then the goal is to avoid pregnancy throughout treatment and for six months after treatment ends. The guidelines are to use two reliable forms of birth control. Birth control should be used in situations where pregnancy is even remotely possible. This includes women who have had tubal sterilizations and men who have had vasectomies. Technically the only conditions in which pregnancy is impossible are for women who are post-menopausal or who have had a hysterectomy. According to the Menopause Guidebook published by the North American Menopause Society, menopause is defined as the permanent end of fertility marked by the absence of any menstrual bleeding for 1 year (assuming there are no other causes).
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Notice the use of the word **reliable** when discussing birth control. **Reliable** means using medically accepted contraceptive methods and using them correctly. Whatever you choose, make sure you are well-informed on how to use the method correctly. Also, notice the word **two**. This means that if you use two forms of birth control and one fails, then you have back-up protection.

If pregnancy occurs during or six months after treatment has stopped, report this immediately. Tell your medical provider. All pregnancies should be reported to the Ribavirin Pregnancy Registry. You or your doctor can do this. This is confidential, free, and important. (See Resource Section)

Types of Birth Control (The higher percentage is with perfect use)

- Abstinence – 100% reliable, but since it’s impractical, include a back-up method
- Tubal Sterilization – 99.5-99.9% reliable
- Vasectomy – 99.5-99.9% reliable
- IUDs 99 – > 99% reliable
- Birth Control Implant – > 99% reliable
- Emergency Contraception (Morning After Pill) – 98-99%
- The “Shot” – 97-99.7% reliable
- The “Patch” – 92-> 99% reliable
- The “Ring” – 92-> 99% reliable
- The “Pill” – 92-98% reliable
- Condom – 85-98% reliable, nearly 100% with withdrawal
- Diaphragm – 84-94% reliable
- Birth Control Sponge – 84-91% reliable
- Female condom – 79-95% reliable
- Fertility Awareness – 75-99% reliable when using a back-up method for fertile days
- Withdrawal – 73-96% reliable
- Cervical Cap – 71-86%
- Spermicide – 71-85% reliable

**Below are examples of two reliable forms of contraception, where vasectomy is considered one method and tubal ligation another.**

- A man with a vasectomy whose post-procedure infertility has been confirmed plus a correctly used condom
- A woman who underwent tubal sterilization whose partner uses a condom correctly
- A man who correctly uses a condom with a spermicidal
- A woman who correctly uses a diaphragm with a spermicidal
- A man with a vasectomy and a woman with a tubal ligation

For information about emergency contraception, talk to your medical provider or contact Planned Parenthood.

Important Points

- Rule out pregnancy prior to starting HCV treatment
- Pregnancy tests should be conducted during and for the 6 months after the treatment period
- Use two reliable forms of birth control during and six months after treatment
- Whatever method you choose, know how to use it correctly
- Report pregnancy immediately

Breastfeeding

Nursing mothers who want to undergo HCV treatment must choose either breastfeeding or treatment. They should not do both at the same time.
Women and HCV

Foreword
Hepatitis C (HCV) is an equal opportunity virus. It affects men and women from all ethnic backgrounds. In the United States, there is a slightly preponderance of HCV among men. Although more people will die with HCV than of HCV, it is a complicated disease with a challenging treatment regimen. Women living with HCV have issues that differ from men's.

Women are more likely to clear HCV than men are. This means that after they contracted HCV, their bodies successfully fought it off. They will test positive for HCV antibodies, but further tests will show that they do not actually have it.

Liver disease tends to progress more slowly in women than in men. Women are less likely to die from HCV than men are. Avoiding alcohol is one of the most important steps you can take in order to help your liver. The amounts of alcohol for healthy women (without HCV) are lower than the amounts for men. Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related health problems. Add in hepatitis C and you have a recipe for disaster.

Now some good news. There is effective treatment for HCV with success rates as high as 79%. More good news, even if treatment does not eliminate the hepatitis C virus, people can still reap some benefit from trying it.

Women have a higher success rate if they complete treatment prior to menopause. If you are a woman thinking about treatment, learn about the risks and benefits of treatment. Above all else, know the warnings about pregnancy and breastfeeding.

HCV is a silent disease. Some people report feeling free of symptoms and are often surprised when they learn they have HCV. Sometimes the only sign of HCV is found when a blood test is done. This may occur after one of the liver enzymes, ALT, is abnormally high. This suggests that the liver might...