
a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

*Being an Effective
Healthcare Consumer:*

The Medical Alphabet

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Our health is in the hands of numerous people with a variety of letters trailing their names. For instance, nurses can have over 50 different abbreviations after their names. What do these letters mean and what do these people do? Here are some definitions of some common abbreviations for medical occupations you may encounter:

M.A. Medical Assistant – MAs perform routine clinical and clerical tasks. The MA may be the person who escorts you to the examining room, takes vital signs, and asks you some health questions. MAs are usually trained through a formal program, but MAs are not licensed. MAs are supervised by physicians or nurses. (Note: Outside of medicine, “MA” generally means Masters of Arts.)

N.A. Nursing Assistant – NAs work in hospitals at the same level as MAs. NAs may give patients baths, take vital signs, and help with patients’ basic needs. NAs are supervised by nurses and are not licensed.

R.N. Registered Nurse – RNs work in hospitals, clinics, homes, and other community settings. They

perform many tasks such as making patient assessments, educating patients, administering medications and other treatments. There are many types of nurses such as advice nurses, public health nurses, clinic nurses, surgical nurses, home health nurses, and psychiatric nurses. RNs receive their training in a number of ways and may have a bachelor’s degree, associate’s degree, or nursing school diploma. The addition of a “C” followed by other letters signifies that the nurse is certified in a specialty. RNs are licensed and usually report to physicians or other advanced level practitioners.

L.V.N. or L.P.N. – Licensed Vocational Nurse or Licensed Practical Nurse -These nurses function in much the same way as RNs. They have less education and are licensed. The roles of LVNs and LPNs are slightly restricted compared to RNs, but there is a great deal of overlap. They are usually supervised by RNs, physicians or other advanced level practitioners.

N.P. Nurse Practitioner – NPs are highly trained advanced practice RNs, who usually have at least a master’s degree. Sometimes NPs may have RNP, FNP or other letters following their names. These simply signify a focus in their education. The laws describing the scope of responsibility differ between states. NPs can work independently, but they usually work under a physician’s supervision. Usually the physician does not need to be immediately present in order for an NP to function. They can prescribe medications, order lab tests, and in certain cases, perform some surgical procedures and administer anesthesia.

P.A. Physician Assistant – PAs are highly trained mid-level practitioners who practice under the license and supervision of physicians. They usually have at least a bachelor’s degree. In general, PAs can practice in all medical and surgical specialties provided they are properly trained and supervised. Usually the physician does not need to be present in order for a PA to function. They can write prescriptions, order lab tests and perform other medical tasks often performed by physicians.

M.D. Medical Doctor – MDs have attended medical school and passed rigorous licensing exams. They can be physicians or surgeons. There are a host of other letter combinations that can follow MD. These are earned when the doctor has obtained some advanced training, education or certification.

A note about HCV medical specialties:

- **Gastroenterologists** – These physicians specialize in diseases of the digestive system. The liver is part of that system.
- **Hepatologists** – These are gastroenterologists who specialize in just liver diseases. Hepatologists usually practice in medical centers that have liver transplant programs.

There are many other combinations of letters that designate professional distinction. Pharmacist (PharmD), dentist (DDS), doctor of osteopathy (DO), doctor of chiropractics (DC) physical therapist (PT), respiratory therapist (RT) and so on. Professions such as Chinese medicine, naturopathy, etc. also have their own letter designations. If you see unfamiliar abbreviations following a name, ask about them. Professionals have earned those abbreviations and are usually happy to explain the meanings.

Each member of your healthcare team has a role. Although some have more training than others, their training makes them more suited for specific tasks. Learn how each is involved in your care. For instance, most of your phone conversations might be with the nurse, but it is actually the nursing assistant who talks to you at your appointments. If you see a physician assistant or nurse practitioner, ask if they will be your primary practitioner or if there will be certain times when you will interact with a physician. Knowing who does what can help streamline your care while at the same time build your medical support system.

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Below are just some of the publications and services you can find at www.hcvadvocate.org:

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For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit www.hcvadvocate.org.

• *hcspFACTsheet* •

A publication of the Hepatitis C Support Project

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