

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

HCV Wellness: Managing Common Symptoms

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Chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is often referred to as a silent disease.

This reputation for silence is based largely on the fact that the liver is considered a “non-complaining” organ. In short, the liver can suffer considerable damage and still function quite well. However, common symptoms are frequently reported by chronically infected HCV patients. Results of a study published in Hepatology stated that more than 70% of HCV positive patients reported at least one complaint.¹

The following article identifies some of the most common symptoms reported by HCV patients, along with some tips for managing symptoms. These tips are suggested for the average non-cirrhotic HCV patient. Before employing any of these techniques, talk to your doctor or other licensed care provider. Self-diagnosis should not replace health care; it can also be a prescription for disaster.

Fatigue

- Rule out other causes of fatigue, such as thyroid abnormalities, diabetes, anemia, depression, sleep disorders, dehydration, etc.
- Make sure you are getting sufficient sleep. The National Sleep Foundation states that the average adult needs 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night.
- Drink sufficient water and other nutritional liquids (10 to 16 glasses per day) that do not contain sugar or caffeine.
- Use moderate exercise to re-energize. A ten-minute walk can work wonders, particularly a walk in a scenic area. Stretching, especially for those confined to a desk for hours, can be helpful.
- Take short naps – no more than 20 minutes and not too close to bedtime.
- Consider an integrated movement program such as Pilates, Qigong, Tai Chi, or Yoga.
- Avoid excess stress. Use stress-reduction techniques, such as meditation, massage, watching a sunrise or sunset.
- Keep your life simple. Establish priorities and cut back on responsibilities.
- 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. As much as they would have you believe, it is not considered slave labor to ask children to empty the dishwasher. It is not tacky to ask friends over for a potluck dinner and ask them to help with the dishes.

Muscle and Joint Aches

- Get a proper diagnosis for the cause of pain before beginning a self-help regimen.
- Ask your physician about the use of prescription and non-prescription medications to help with these symptoms. It is a common myth that HCV patients cannot take acetaminophen (brand name – Tylenol) or paracetamol. In most cases, acetaminophen is considered to be safe if taken occasionally and within the recommended

dose. Never mix acetaminophen and alcohol. If you take other prescription or over-the-counter medications, ask your doctor or nurse about the safety of taking these along with acetaminophen.

- Try gentle stretching exercises.
- Avoid prolonged periods of inactivity.
- Try warm or hot baths. Spoil yourself with a bubble bath.
- Massage and acupuncture may be helpful. You can see a trained practitioner or learn these techniques for yourself.

Headaches

- Discuss headaches with your medical provider.
- Ask your provider about the use of prescription and non-prescription medications to help with these symptoms.
- Avoid stress.
- Try relaxation techniques.

Dryness - skin, mouth, nose and eyes

- Drink sufficient water and sip it throughout the day.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless candy to relieve dry mouth.
- Avoid soap. Use a non-soap cleanser such as Cetaphil.
- Hypoallergenic creams applied immediately following bathing can reduce dry skin. Use cream alone or add a couple of drops of lightweight oil. (Neutrogena sells excellent body oil. Baby oil is another choice.)
- Do not forget to use sun protection on your skin, lips and hair.
- For occasional dry eyes, use over-the counter artificial tear drops. If regular use is necessary, use a preservative-free type.
- Saline nose sprays can help with dry nasal passages.

Gastrointestinal (GI) Complaints

- Intermittent pain in the liver area is common. Discuss GI complaints with your medical provider.

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Choose low-fat, nutritional foods when at all possible.
- Avoid greasy, acidic or spicy food.
- Consult a nutritionist for further advice.

Emotional Concerns

Some people with chronic HCV infection complain of problems that affect their overall sense of well being and ability to function. These can include depression, irritability, insomnia, difficulty concentrating and even some confusion. If any of these problems occur, discuss them with your doctor. It is important to rule out other causes for these complaints. Try meditation, moderate exercise, Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga, or stress management techniques. Reserve your “best times” for activities that require the most concentration. Do not neglect your recreational needs. Find ways to laugh. Humor has no side effects except perhaps a few laughs.

Cognitive Issues

Some patients with chronic HCV infection report mental or cognitive impairment. Among patients, this is referred to as “brain fog.” There are many factors that can affect mental acuity, including stress, depression and fatigue. If you are experiencing “brain fog,” try to analyze your situation. Are you experiencing stress? Are you getting sufficient sleep? Are you depressed?

When it comes to health improvement, the brain is sometimes left out of the equation. However, the brain is an essential component of health and needs to be included in health maintenance. Here are suggestions for coping with brain fog and keeping the brain healthy:

- Be physically and mentally active on a daily basis.
- Maintain a healthy diet. Do not skip meals. Drink sufficient water.
- Manage stress. Meditation and relaxation techniques can help you think more clearly, especially when practiced regularly.

- Avoid alcohol and unhealthy substance use.
- Get sufficient sleep. The average adult needs seven to nine hours of sleep each night.
- Breathe – oxygen is essential for our brains.
- Use tools to remind you of important tasks and events, such as calendars, post-it notes and daily or weekly pill containers.
- Create habits and daily routines. Write things down and keep your lists in the same place.
- Stay organized
- Challenge your brain with games, puzzles – try one of HCSP’s Hepatitis Crossword Puzzles.
- Learn to laugh at yourself if you forget minor things or cannot remember a certain word. If you laugh at yourself, others will be follow suit and laugh with you, not at you.

Social and Sexual Issues

The diagnosis of chronic hepatitis C can have a negative impact on one’s sexual relationships. The issue of transmitting HCV to another can create both real and emotional concerns. It is essential that everyone engaging in sexual activity (with or without a potentially infectious disease) practice safer sex. Having said this, sexual transmission of HCV among monogamous sexual partners is very uncommon. Communicate your fears and concerns of transmission with your sexual partner. If you need additional information about this, see HCSP’s *Sexual Transmission of Hepatitis C*, or contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, your local public health department, Planned Parenthood, or your medical provider.

Sometimes fatigue and fear can lead to self-absorption and seclusion. Make every attempt to avoid isolation. The importance of support cannot be minimized. Hepatitis C support groups can be valuable. Patients can be experts of a very special kind. They are true authorities on how to live with this disease. Learning how to cope can make all the difference in the world. As the saying goes, “pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.”

¹Patrice Cacoub, Thierry Poynard, Pascale Ghillani, Frederic Charlotte, Martine Olivi, Jean Charles Piette, Pierre Opolon. Extra Hepatic Manifestations in 1614 Patients with Chronic Hepatitis C. *Hepatology* 1999 Vol. 30, No. 4 (Supplement) (Abstract No. 805).

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