Treatments for Hepatitis C

I have hepatitis C. Can I be treated?

Yes. There are treatments for hepatitis C. However, these treatments are not right for everyone. Only you and your doctor can decide if a certain treatment is right for you.

What do the treatments for hepatitis C try to do?

Treatments for hepatitis C try to do three things. Most of the time, they can't do them all. Treatments for hepatitis C try to

- remove (or *clear*) all the hepatitis C virus from your body
- stop or slow down the damage to your liver
- make you feel better

What are the treatments that have been approved for hepatitis C?

Before your doctor can prescribe any treatment, it has to be approved for that purpose by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Right now, several treatments for hepatitis C have been approved by the FDA:

- Standard or long-acting (pegylated) interferon by itself (*interferon monotherapy*)
- Standard interferon with ribavirin
- Long-acting (pegylated) interferon with ribavirin

What is interferon and how do I take it?

Interferon is a protein that your body makes to fight infections. Interferon used as a treatment increases the amount of interferon in your body. Interferon can only be given as a shot. You cannot take interferon in a pill.

There are two types of interferon used to treat hepatitis C, standard interferon and pegylated interferon. Standard interferon is given as three shots a week. Pegylated (or *long-acting*) interferon is given as one shot a week. Which type you get depends on what you and your doctor think will work best for you.

- Standard (or *three times a week*) interferon has been used for a long time. Each shot of standard interferon contains 3 million units of the drug. Because of the way drugs are measured, 3 million units sounds like a lot more medicine than it actually is.

- Pegylated (or *once a week*) interferon is a newer form. It may give better results in some patients. Some of the side effects of pegylated interferon, including skin reactions, may be worse than with standard interferon. However, some patients find one shot a week to be an advantage.

Many things need to be considered before you begin treatment. Your doctor may need to know more about the amount of the virus in your blood (or *viral load*) and the type of hepatitis C virus (or *genotype*) that you have. You should also talk with your doctor about the benefits of standard or pegylated interferon. Together, you can decide what type of treatment is right for you.

What is ribavirin and how do I take it?

Ribavirin is a medicine that fights certain viruses. It comes in a capsule (or *pill*) that you can swallow. Ribavirin by itself doesn't work against hepatitis C.

What is combination therapy and how do I take it?

If you take ribavirin and interferon together, then both treatments work much better. This is currently the best medicine for hepatitis C. In 30 percent to 50 percent of people who take ribavirin and interferon together, all the hepatitis C virus is removed from their bodies. In certain patients, the long-acting interferon is better than the standard interferon in combination with ribavirin. In other patients the response to pegylated interferon plus ribavirin is the same as the response to standard interferon plus ribavirin.

Discuss with your doctor different treatments to decide which is best for you.

How will my doctor know if my treatment is working?

Your doctor may take blood samples from you before, during, and after your treatment. By running tests on these samples, your doctor should be able to tell how well your treatment is working.

My doctor told me I am a "complete responder." What does that mean?

The treatment worked while you were taking the drugs and seemed to work even after the drugs were stopped.

My doctor told me I am a "non-responder." What does that mean?

Hepatitis C treatment doesn't work for everyone. In some people, it works better than in others. If you are a non-responder, it means that your treatment didn't work as well as your doctor hoped that it would. There are many different kinds of "non-response." Some of the kinds that your doctor might mention include the following:

- **Transient response**
  The treatment worked only as long as you took it. When you stopped taking it, hepatitis C came back.
- **Breakthrough response**
  The treatment seemed to work at first, but then it stopped working.
- **Partial response**
  The treatment seemed to work a little bit, but it never worked completely.

What are side effects, and what should I do if I have them?

"Side effects" are things that might happen in your body because of your treatment. Some side effects are serious and make you feel sick. Others are mild and make you feel a little different than normal. There are even side effects that you don't feel at all, but your doctor may notice from lab tests or physical examinations.

Having side effects doesn't always mean that you need to stop your treatment.

Many unpleasant side effects might go away by themselves. Others can be managed by your doctor. For example, your doctor might give you another medicine that makes your side effects better. If you notice side effects from your hepatitis C treatment, tell your doctor right away. Do not stop taking your treatment or change the amount unless your doctor tells you to.

What can I do to make my treatment work the best that it can?

The best way to help your treatment work is to follow your doctor's advice. Here are some other suggestions:

~ Take care of yourself
Eat well, drink eight to 10 glasses of water each day, and try to get a full night's sleep.

~ Learn about the hepatitis C medications you are taking
This includes special risks and warnings, such as the need to practice two forms of birth control while on ribavirin, even after treatment has finished.

~ Follow your doctor's instructions on taking your medicine

~ Tell your doctor about any side effects as soon as they happen

~ Keep all your doctor appointments
If you have to cancel an appointment, call your doctor and schedule a new one as soon as possible.

~ Write down your doctor's name and phone number
Carry this information with you at all times.

~ Write the names and amounts of the medicines you are taking, and also carry this information with you at all times

~ Check with your doctor before starting new medicines
This includes vitamins, supplements, herbal remedies, prescriptions drugs, or other over-the-counter drugs.

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/

For more information on hepatitis, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis

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