

What are side effects?

Medicines can cause different changes or effects in the body. Some effects, like making you feel better, are the ones that you want and expect to happen. Other effects are ones that you don't want or don't expect. The effects that you don't want or expect are called *side effects*.

Almost all medicines have side effects. Some people take aspirin for a headache, but it gives them an upset stomach. The upset stomach is a side effect of the aspirin. Not all side effects are unpleasant, though. Even the side effects that make you feel sick aren't always bad. Some side effects mean that your medicine has started to work.

Will I have side effects from treatment for hepatitis C (HCV)?

Most people who get treated for hepatitis C have side effects. These side effects can be mild or they can be severe. The same treatment can cause different side effects in different people. There is no way of knowing which side effects you might have. If you have side effects from your hepatitis C treatment, you should tell your doctor. If you think you might forget them, write them down. Your doctor needs to know as much as possible about your side effects to help your treatment work better.

What are some of the side effects of hepatitis C treatment?

Side effects of hepatitis C treatment may include any of the following:

- Feeling tired
- Having a fever and chills
- Feeling sick to your stomach, nausea, or vomiting
- Not feeling hungry or not eating as much as usual
- Feeling anxious, irritable, depressed, or moody
- Having headaches and muscle aches
- Losing your hair
- Not being able to sleep (*insomnia*)
- Having dry, itchy, or irritated skin or a rash
- Having problems with thyroid disease or diabetes
- Having shortness of breath
- Having chest pain

If you have any of these side effects, tell your doctor.

How can I reduce the side effects of my hepatitis treatment?

Your doctor might give you special advice or medicines to help you reduce (or *manage*) the side effects from your treatment. Other side



effects might go away by themselves or become less unpleasant with time. In the meantime, here are some ways to handle unpleasant side effects:

- Drink plenty of clear liquids. Try to drink between eight to 10 glasses of water or another clear liquid every day. Drink even more if you are vomiting.
- Do not drink beverages that have alcohol, caffeine (or *coffee, cola, and strong tea*), or a lot of sugar (or *most soft drinks*).
- Try to get plenty of sleep at night. Take short naps during the day.
- Eat small, healthy meals. Crackers, dry toast, or ginger ale can help settle your stomach. Greasy, high fat foods (including most “fast food”) can make you feel worse. Try to eat healthy meals even if you are not very hungry.
- Exercise regularly but lightly. Walking and lifting light weights are good choices.
- Take any pain relievers that your doctor suggests. Try taking your medicine before you go to bed, so that you can sleep through the side effects. Taking a pain reliever about a half-hour before your interferon injection can help make the side effects less severe. Don't take any pain relievers until you check with your doctor.
- Stay away from things that make you feel worse (called *triggers*). These may include loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, or skipped meals.

- Don't color or perm your hair until your treatment is finished.
- Don't use strong detergents or soaps that might irritate your skin. If you need suggestions for mild products, ask your doctor.
- Try to use simple, unscented lotions to help dry and itchy skin.

What can I do if I feel irritable, anxious, depressed or moody from my treatment?

Your hepatitis C treatment might make you feel irritable, angry, anxious, depressed, or confused. You may also have mood swings. Try to remember that these are only the side effects of your treatment. They should go away, but if you need help dealing with them, please tell your doctor or nurse. He or she can refer you to someone at VA who can help.

Here are more suggestions on how to deal with these feelings:

- Talk with your VA health care provider about these and other side effects.
- Talk about your feelings with a family member, friend, or someone else you trust.
- Tell people close to you when you are taking your treatment. Tell them that it can affect your moods.
- Join a support group to learn from others who have been through this.

- Avoid things that can make you feel stressed, like too much caffeine, sugar, or nicotine.
- Learn ways to relax. Meditate or breathe quietly. Go for a walk or do some other light exercise.
- Take care of your body. Eat healthy meals, get lots of sleep, and drink plenty of water.
- If you are taking medicine because you are depressed, be sure not to skip a dose.
- Keep all of your appointments with your psychiatrist or therapist.

If your mood swings or depression gets very severe, or if you ever think about suicide, call your doctor right away. There are other ways your doctor can help you.

If I have side effects, can't I just reduce the amount of medicine I am taking?

No. If you take less medicine or stop taking it, then your treatment might not work as well. You must talk with your doctor about your side effects. He or she will work with you to find the best way to deal with them.

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/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4 HEPACDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>



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