Coping with Hepatitis C: Diet and Nutrition

If you have hepatitis C, you usually don’t need special foods. Just try to eat a balanced diet, maintain a healthy weight, and limit your use of alcohol.

A good diet can actually improve liver health in a person with hepatitis C by leading to better liver functioning and a lowered risk of cirrhosis (scarring of the liver). It also can help the immune system stay strong and fight off illness.

In addition, a good diet can help reduce body fat and control blood sugar, which lowers the risk of diabetes. This is particularly important for people infected with hepatitis C because they have higher rates of diabetes than those who are not infected.

GENERAL TIPS...

Eat a variety of healthy foods

Eat regular, balanced meals made up of a variety of foods. That way, you will be more likely to get the vitamins and minerals that your body needs to function at its best.

- Eat whole-grain cereals, breads, and grains (whole grains include the bran and the germ of the grain and provide a lot of fiber -- to keep you “regular”)
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day
- Get adequate protein (including fish, dried beans, soy, nuts, eggs, and low-fat dairy products and meats)
- Go easy on fatty, salty, and sugary foods. (It will be easier to resist eating these foods if you don’t stock them in your house.)
- Drink enough fluids (6-8 glasses a day). Don’t drink too many things that may dehydrate you, such as drinks that have a lot of caffeine, alcohol, or sugar. Coffee has been shown to have benefits on the liver, however, so you do not need to avoid coffee if you have hepatitis

Reach and maintain a healthy weight

Following a generally healthy diet and keeping a normal body weight (measured as Body Mass Index [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/BMI/bmicalc.htm] or BMI) may not seem like a specific treatment for hepatitis C, but it is a great way of reducing the damage to your liver and preventing additional injury.

Being overweight is linked to the buildup of fat in the liver, called “fatty liver.” Over many years, having a fatty liver when you already have hepatitis C will make it more likely to develop cirrhosis. The damage from the fat deposits in the liver, plus the damage of the viral infection in the liver, together will worsen and speed up the inflammation and scarring. Being overweight also makes it less likely that the hepatitis C virus will successfully be eliminated if you are treated.
If your goal is to lose weight, you should learn healthy ways to decrease the amount of calories you eat. Exercise is an important part of losing weight and it may lessen some of the unpleasant side effects of hepatitis C treatment. Never use over-the-counter appetite suppressants or stimulants or use herbal medicines to lose weight. These may actually damage your liver.

If your goal is to gain weight, you should continue to eat a variety of healthy foods. You may need to eat more snacks between meals and take in more calories per day. But you should stay active and exercise to keep physically fit.

Limit alcohol

Alcohol can lead to serious liver damage in people with hepatitis. Alcohol is a direct toxin (poison) to your liver. It prevents your body from absorbing certain vitamins that it needs to work properly. Alcohol can also make your hepatitis C medicines less effective. Although you may not need to avoid alcohol completely, if you believe you have a drinking problem, talk with your health care provider. VA has programs to help you control or stop your drinking.

Educate yourself

Learn how to read labels on food packages. Foods we think are healthy, such as canned vegetables, may contain more sodium or calories than we need. Pay attention to serving size and how many servings you are eating.

Check before taking dietary supplements

Do not take vitamin and mineral supplements until you check with your health care provider. Not everyone needs supplements, and not everyone needs the same thing or the same dose. Some supplements could even cause damage to your liver, despite what a label on a bottle might say.

Two examples:

Iron: Some people with hepatitis C have above-average iron levels in their body, and could be harmed by iron supplements. If you have hepatitis C, you should not take iron supplements unless you are instructed to do so. You do not need to avoid foods containing iron, just do not take iron pills.

Vitamin D: Vitamin D is important for bone health, but it is also important for liver health. It’s worth asking your provider if you need to have your blood levels of vitamin D checked—to see if you are deficient in vitamin D and, if so, whether you should take a supplement.
Special Dietary Needs

There are special cases in which hepatitis C can affect the diet:

Patients being treated with interferon
Hepatitis C treatment can cause side effects that make it difficult to eat, such as loss of appetite, sore mouth and throat, metallic tastes, nausea, and vomiting. Avoid greasy or fatty foods. Foods that make your stomach feel better include crackers, toast, and mild carbonated drinks, such as ginger ale. If you feel nauseous when you wake up in the morning, keep these foods/beverages by your bed; it may help to eat them before you get up.

Patients with cirrhosis
If your liver disease progresses, you may lose your appetite and become so tired you will have a hard time eating. You need to eat regularly even if you are not very hungry because if you become too thin or poorly nourished, you will be less able to fight off infections or other complications of your liver disease. Frequent, small meals may be easier for you to tolerate and may decrease feelings of bloating or fullness. If fluid begins to accumulate in your legs and abdomen, you may need to eat less protein, salt, or iron, or drink less fluid.

Where can I get more information on diet and nutrition?

Whether you need to lose or gain weight, or simply to follow a better diet, your health care provider can refer you to a dietitian or nutritionist who can help you learn more about good food choices and combinations.

The USDA's website ChooseMyPlate.gov illustrates the 5 food groups that are the building blocks for a healthy diet. The site offers tips on eating healthy and managing your weight.

Calculate your Body Mass Index:

VA's MOVE!® Weight Management System
http://www.move.va.gov/

Understanding Food Labels:
http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm
Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local Veterans Affairs medical center and visit the VA Viral Hepatitis website:
http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/

You can also find information on viral hepatitis from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/index.htm

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IB 10-154 February 2016