

Fatigue and hepatitis C

The term 'fatigue' is often used to describe any symptoms associated with tiredness. It is not unusual for many people, whether they have hepatitis C or not, to experience periods of extreme tiredness. This can be caused by a busy or changed lifestyle, stress or other factors. The majority of people with hepatitis C will experience fatigue at some stage. There is a wide clinical spectrum of fatigue. The mildest forms are where fatigue occurs through over-exertion or lack of rest and will respond well to rest. In its severe form, fatigue is neither the result of over-exertion nor lack of rest, and in turn does not respond to rest.

Why does hepatitis C cause fatigue?

The cause of fatigue in people with hepatitis C has not been fully determined, but there are two main possibilities.

The immune system

In many other viral infections, such as measles, the body activates the immune system and clears the virus in a matter of days or weeks. With hepatitis C, the immune system is activated but in approximately 75% of people who become infected, the virus is not cleared. So the immune system engages in a continuous, long-term response to try and clear the virus. This can result in fatigue.

The metabolic process of the liver

The liver is the centre of many metabolic processes that occur in the body. Liver disease of any kind interferes with these normal biochemical activities. In a person with chronic hepatitis C any number of metabolic processes may be affected, resulting in nausea, reduced appetite, and reduced absorption and digestion of nutrients. There is also a reduced capacity to remove unwanted and toxic substances from the body. These factors can also result in fatigue.

Management of fatigue

For anyone with hepatitis C, understanding fatigue and its symptoms can be very important. Often an explanation on why a person is feeling fatigued can reduce the stress caused by it.

Adopting healthy behavior and lifestyle is integral to maximising individual well-being and health. It's important to be aware of the harmful effects that alcohol, drug use, poor rest and poor lifestyle can have on liver function, which in turn can contribute to fatigue. Experiencing fatigue over an extended period of time can affect many areas of life including relationships, work and other activities. In some cases, fatigue causes people to feel as though they have lost control of their lives. It can be useful to consider getting counselling support to help manage fatigue and associated symptoms.

It's also important to ask your doctor to examine the possible causes of your fatigue as other conditions unrelated to hepatitis C may be contributing.

Simple steps to assist in managing fatigue

- Balance daily activities: avoid overloading your day and work at times when you feel the best.
- Sit down to do some activities such as ironing or showering.
- Conserve energy by using equipment such as a laundry trolley to take washing to the line.
- Place items you use regularly within easy reach.
- When you feel fatigued, rest or participate in a lighter activity rather than sleep during the day. This will help you regain energy while not disturbing your usual nighttime sleep patterns.
- Pace yourself and take regular breaks.
- Prioritise your activities.
- Ask someone to help if you feel tired.

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- Exercise, but get advice about an appropriate exercise plan.
- Avoid large, heavy meals. Eat healthy foods, in smaller servings more often.
- Ensure you have good quality sleep.

Complementary therapies

Although scientifically unproven, there are many complementary therapies that can help fatigue symptoms. Some herbal therapies may improve liver function and reduce toxic burden. Some therapies act on the whole body, including the immune and digestive systems.

Because everyone's symptoms are different, each person needs to be assessed individually. What works for one person will not necessarily work for another and it is important not to self-prescribe. We recommend seeing a qualified practitioner who has a good knowledge of the biochemistry of the liver, and is well aware of the possible toxicity concerns of certain herbs and natural compounds to the liver.

Useful contacts

Hepatitis Victoria

Hepatitis Infoline 1800 703 003
Office telephone: (03) 9380 4644
Email: info@hepvic.org.au
Web: www.hepvic.org.au

Nurse on call

Telephone: 1300 606 024
Expert health advice from a registered nurse
24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Useful publications

Hepatitis C: Guide to healthy living

Living with cirrhosis

All these publications are available from
Hepatitis Victoria.

Useful website

The Better Health Channel:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Victorian Department of Human Services consumer health information website for information about all aspects of health, including complementary and alternative medicine.

This infosheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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