



HEPATITIS C

Information, advice, testing,
support & training service

Side effects – coping with fatigue and sleep problems

Fatigue

Fatigue is another common side effect of HCV treatment, and of hepatitis C itself. In clinical trials of pegylated interferon plus ribavirin, 65% of patients reported fatigue. Talk to your clinical specialist if this is a concern. Other medical conditions that lead to fatigue may occur during HCV treatment. Anemia, depression, insomnia, and hypothyroidism are side effects of HCV therapy associated with feelings of exhaustion. These can all be treated.

Assuming you have already consulted your doctor, examine three important factors that influence energy levels: sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

Inadequate or poor quality sleep can lead to feelings of daytime tiredness. Make sure you are getting sufficient sleep. The average adult needs seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

Be sure to eat foods with high nutritional value. Fruits and nuts are good choices. Eat small, frequent meals. Make sure you are getting sufficient quantities of vitamins and minerals.

Stay well hydrated by drinking plenty of water. For the average adult, this means drinking two litres of water daily.

Light exercise is probably the single most effective antidote for fatigue. This can be hard to believe, especially if just getting out of bed is an ordeal. When you do not feel like moving, move anyway. Try exercising for 10 to 15 minute intervals, two to three times daily. If you are not accustomed to physical activity, start slowly and for shorter, less frequent periods. Some activities to try are walking, biking, swimming, dancing, gardening, yoga, tai chi, qigong, and Pilates.

Tips for managing fatigue:

- Stress can be draining. Learn relaxation techniques
- Unmanageable pain can be exhausting, seek help
- Vary your activities, do not sit too long or stand too long
- Balance rest with activity. Try to rest *before* you get too fatigued
- Rest even if you are not tired. This may help you avoid future fatigue
- Take short naps, no more than 20 minutes and not close to bedtime
- Take a shower. Alternate water temperatures from hot to cold

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- Practice good posture
- Stretch
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drugs
- Make sure your indoor space is sunny or well lit
- Ask for help with chores and other activities
- Create shortcuts to get things done
- Organize your work areas so you can work more efficiently
- Schedule your most demanding tasks for the times of the day when you are usually at your best
- Take “mini holidays” Spend an afternoon doing something you really enjoy
- Rub your earlobes for at least seven seconds
- Find ways to laugh
- Practice deep breathing for a minute whenever you feel tired
- Try Chinese medicine or hypnosis

Attitude cannot cure fatigue, but it can be a powerful ally. Watch the negative “self-talk.” When all else fails, laugh. There is no doubt about it fatigue puts a damper on life. However, fatigue accompanied by humor is more tolerable than fatigue accompanied by misery. The choice is yours.

There are also herbs, supplements, and vitamins that may help relieve fatigue. However, there has not been much research on the use of herbs, supplements, and vitamins during HCV therapy. The best advice is to avoid these substances during therapy, or discuss their use with your clinical specialists *before* trying them.

Insomnia

Insomnia, or having trouble getting to sleep and staying asleep, is one of the most common side effects of HCV treatment. Anyone that has ever suffered from insomnia can attest to the fact that it can make you miserable. It may even make the other side effects of treatment worse.

Start by talking to your doctor. A variety of medical issues can cause sleep problems. One example is sleep apnea. Sleep apnea interferes with breathing during sleep and can cause serious health problems. People with sleep apnea often do not know they have it. Fortunately, sleep apnea can be treated.

Tell your clinical specialists about all the dietary supplements and drugs you are taking (over-the-counter, prescription, or recreational). Some of these may be contributing to your sleep problems. For instance, ginseng and certain cold medicines can keep people awake.

Getting too stirred up before bedtime can also make it hard to fall asleep. Worrying can cause us to toss and turn. Watching the news or exercising before bedtime can be overly stimulating. Sleep experts recommend leaving the TV out of the bedroom. Turn off the TV and your computer an hour or two before bedtime.

The following can interfere with a good night's sleep:

- Caffeine in coffee, fizzy drinks, tea, chocolate
- Tobacco
- A room that is too hot or too cold
- Light
- Noise
- An uncomfortable bed
- Using alcohol before bedtime
- Being hungry
- Eating a large meal close to bedtime
- Drinking too many liquids before sleep
- A snoring bed partner
- A pet in the bedroom

Tips for promoting sleep:

- Make eight hours of sleep a regular habit. Sleeping less during the week and trying to catch up on the weekend doesn't work
- Try to go to bed at the same time every night
- If you have a clock that is always lit, turn it so you can't see the time
- Exercise every day
- If you nap, keep it short and early in the day
- Try reading before bedtime, but use a low-watt bulb
- Do not eat during the few hours before bedtime, but don't go to bed hungry. If you eat something, choose food that is light and nutritious. Avoid spicy or greasy foods
- Take a hot bath before bed
- If you feel you need to worry, tell yourself that you will only worry in the daytime. Make your bedroom a fret-free zone. Learn relaxation techniques to reduce stress and worrying
- Listen to relaxation tapes
- Do not lay awake in bed for more than 20 to 30 minutes. Get up, do something boring for a little while, and then go back to bed
- Your bed is for sleep and sex. If you are not doing either of these, stay out of bed

Some herbal teas can be used to aid relaxation.

Chamomile tea is one of the more widely used herbs for sleep promotion. The downside of herbal teas is that some people are awakened during the night by the need to urinate. The scent of lavender on linens or near the bed is thought to promote relaxation.

If sleep problems persist, your clinical specialist may want to prescribe medication to help you sleep. Both prescription and over-the-counter drugs can be very effective. Some medications can be habit-forming, so it's important to tell your provider if you have a history of substance abuse. With sufficient and accurate information, your clinical specialist is likely to find a

medication that is suited to your needs. If the medication you try does not work well for you, report this to your provider. There are many drugs to treat insomnia, and sometimes it is a matter of trial and error to find a good fit. Insomnia can be a drain on your quality of life, a life already impacted by other treatment side effects.

Do not lay awake thinking about it. Get some help!