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Hep C

Preparing for Treatment

by Adrian Rigg Reprinted from *Hep Review* Edition 74, September 2011

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After deciding to take on hep C treatment, the next question is when to do it. The time between making the decision and commencing treatment can be used to plan and prepare so that you can get the best outcome. Because treatment is not usually urgent, you have the relative luxury of choosing a good time to start.

Everyone experiences and tolerates side-effects differently; no one should expect the worst or be scared off by horror stories, but you need to know what to expect.

People who best know what treatment is like, and what you could do to help prepare, are those who have been through it. Calls to the Hepatitis Helpline are answered by people who can provide information about all aspects of hep C. They have the latest information at their fingertips, and can send out free resources. They can also possibly put you in contact with other people who have gone through the same experience.

There are also online forums, such as [Hep C Australasia](#) and [Hep C Australia](#) where you can quickly and easily register for free, and join in discussions, ask questions of other forum users, or just read previous posts. This is a good way to share experiences in a non-judgemental and non-confrontational way.

After gathering information, it's a good time to speak with your G.P. or clinician so that he or she can answer any questions and deal with your concerns. The 'frequently asked questions' at [Hepatitis N.S.W.](#) are a good place to start for information gathering.

Timing is Everything

Hep C treatment can go on for a up to a year, and side-effects can continue beyond this. It's impossible to set aside a year when it's guaranteed nothing major will happen in your life, but you can choose a time with no planned changes.

Dallo started treatment in 2005, and recommends that people look at the short to medium-term future before considering it. "If people have plans for the near future, perhaps a trip overseas, or a wedding, or whatever, they may not be able to handle it during treatment and for many months afterwards," says Dallo. "People need to have a genuine treatment window, and be helped to recognise or create one."

Having a stable, comfortable place to live and a support network is a good base. You may also need time off work for appointments, so some flexibility in employment is helpful. You don't have to tell your employer or colleagues that you have hep C or are having treatment, but you could consider it if you think it will help them understand what you are going through.

Plan how you might explain time off work; "I'm having treatment for liver disease," enables you to indicate something is wrong without being specific and fully disclosing your hep C. Dr Max Hopwood's report, 3D Project: Diagnosis, disclosure, discrimination and living with hepatitis C, is a good source for more information on disclosure.

Julia is working full-time while undertaking treatment. "The big issues for me were working full-time and trying to sort out days off to coincide with injection days," she says. "People should plan ahead to not use up all their leave days." Altering work hours where possible can make things easier. Sue Mason, Hepatitis C Nurse Consultant at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, encourages people to look at their current situation and find ways to work with it, rather than trying to avoid stress altogether. "Stress is often part of normal life," she says. "People should ask themselves 'Where's the flexibility in what I have now?'".

Alcohol

A recent research project¹ as part of the Australian Chronic Hepatitis C Observational Study (A.C.H.O.S.) set out to find the reasons that hep C treatment is deferred. It reported that issues around consumption of alcohol and other drugs were the greatest factors affecting commencement of treatment. This highlights the need for additional support in these areas; the study discusses strategies such as making support for drug and alcohol issues a part of the assessment for hep C treatment.

Dr Richard Hallinan, Staff Specialist, Addiction Medicine, South Western Sydney Local Health Network, and The Byrne Surgery Redfern, believes that cutting out alcohol is the most important thing people with hep C can do, whether or not they are undertaking treatment.

"It's a really positive step, and that's how I discuss it with people," says Dr. Hallinan. "It shouldn't be seen as a negative, 'you mustn't do

He also points out that drinking is not an absolute barrier to receiving treatment; people should discuss their individual case with their G.P. or specialist.

this', but as something really good for you and your liver."

Alcohol directly affects the liver, and can complicate hep C infection by hastening liver scarring. Alcohol can make it harder to stick with treatment, and some side effects of treatment are made worse by alcohol, so people drinking alcohol do less well on treatment. For these reasons it is important to be completely open with your health professionals about your lifestyle, so that they can ensure you have appropriate support. If your G.P., thinks you need extra help to reduce your alcohol intake, they can refer you to a drug and alcohol specialist. There are anti-craving medications and psychological therapies which can be helpful. Dr. Hallinan says that he has patients whose abstinence from alcohol has greatly improved their general health before, during and after treatment, even if they did not clear hep C. "If people aren't able to start treatment at the moment for whatever reason, we work on helping them to stop drinking. I see it as a form of treatment in itself," says Dr. Hallinan.

He also points out that drinking is not an absolute barrier to receiving treatment; people should discuss their individual case with their G.P. or specialist.

Preparing to Avoid Side Effects

There are strategies to minimise treatment side effects; the more you know about this before starting treatment, the better. "I think you cannot overstate the importance of reducing the impact of side-effects by being prepared for, and dealing with, side effects that can be minimised or eliminated," says Dallo.

This means being aware of the reactions you may experience, such as appetite loss, rashes and insomnia, and having some strategies in place to deal with them; the sooner they are minimised, the easier it will be to continue treatment. Depression and mental health problems can arise during treatment, especially for people with a history of these. Ideally, health professionals will work together to deal with this in preparation for treatment, and prescribe anti-depressants, mood stabilisers or other medication if needed.

It helps to be physically fit before beginning treatment, as the course can be demanding; this includes losing excess weight, eating a healthy diet and quitting smoking. Many people are less active during treatment, and it can take time after finishing to regain fitness. It is also useful to set aside time for relaxation and pursuing other interests, so that treatment doesn't become all consuming.

"You have to stay focussed and not let treatment consume your thoughts," says Julia. "It's easy for it to take over your life so that everything revolves around hep C and treatment."

Personal Support

If you live with other people, they may also need to know what's involved in treatment, if only so they can cope with potential mood swings. It can be especially hard for partners to deal with depression or outbursts directed at them, and it's helpful for them to be able to recognise early signs of depression so that they can be dealt with.

Sue Mason helps prepare patients as much as possible by discussing what they may experience. "It's good to do this with a support person or partner so they are clued in as well," says Sue.

Recognising what others can do to help during this time is important; partners and housemates may be willing to do extra chores such as cleaning and shopping. While it is important for friends and partners to support someone going through treatment, it may also be good for them to have some outside support for themselves.

Professional Support

It is important to have a realistic idea of your chances of clearing hep C before starting treatment. Factors which influence this include your genotype, your age, the length of time you have had hep C and your current lifestyle.

Dr. Hallinan mentions that, with new more effective treatments emerging, it may be better for some people, especially those with genotype 1, to defer treatment. A fibroscan, a type of ultrasound to detect liver scarring, can help guide this decision; your G.P. can refer you to a specialist centre for this simple and painless test.

Another major issue is knowing who to contact when you need help during treatment; sorting this out in advance saves time and energy in the long run. Julia says "Although everyone was really helpful when I did get in contact with them, I found it difficult to contact my specialist outside the monthly appointment, and I wasn't sure if I could contact the nurse at the clinic as I wasn't directly under her care".

You should also think about support after treatment has finished; you will no longer have regular contact with the treatment team but may still experience side-effects and other problems.

The Hepatitis Helpline may be able to help you find a good G.P. who can help with after-treatment care. Health professionals should be willing to discuss these issues at length. Even if you don't clear your hep C after six months or a year of treatment and had the long break from alcohol that goes with it, will give your liver a rest, protect it and even reverse some amount of damage.

For more information and advice about alcohol, phone the Alcohol and Drug Information Service on (02) 9361 8000 or 1800 422 599 (outside Sydney).

Notes:

References

1. Gidding H.F., Law M.G., Amin J., Macdonald G.A., Sasadeusz J.J., Jones T.L., Strasser S.I., George J., Dore, G.J. Predictors of deferral

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