
a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

HCV Treatment: Adherence to HCV Therapy

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ADHERENCE TO HCV THERAPY IS ONE OF THE MOST important predictors of successful HCV treatment. While there are well-defined and established guidelines for some disease states such as HIV, hypertension and others, it is less clear when it comes to adherence for HCV therapy. The basic take-home message is that people on HCV therapy should strive to take as close to 100% of the medications, 100% of the time or as close to 100% as possible – especially during the first twelve weeks of therapy.

Currently, pegylated interferon and ribavirin do not become HCV resistant so the question of adherence is only important right now with respect to treatment outcomes. However, questions of adherence will become more important in the future with the development of direct antiviral therapies such as HCV protease and polymerase inhibitors that will have the potential for the hepatitis C virus to mutate. This could result in the new HCV antiviral or class of antivirals becoming ineffective against HCV.

We do know that with the current HCV medications – pegylated interferon and ribavirin – it is important to take as much of the prescribed medications as possible, but this can be difficult considering the moderate to severe physical and psychological side effects of HCV therapy. There are a number of predictors of treatment response to HCV therapy that are well-recognized as important and this fact sheet will discuss the importance of adherence

and well-known strategies for helping people achieve a successful treatment outcome. It is also important to remember that not everyone will have a successful treatment outcome even with 100% adherence to HCV therapy; however, taking as much of the medicines prescribed will greatly improve the chances of successful treatment.

Belief in Treatment

One of the most important predictors of successful treatment outcome is belief in the medications being used to treat hepatitis C. If a person believes that they will have a successful treatment outcome they will be more likely to take the important steps needed for successful treatment.

Building a Relationship with Medical Providers

Another important strategy is to build a strong and open-minded relationship with your medical provider; one which is nonjudgmental and non-threatening and which provides appropriate education. Medical providers should also encourage the use of support systems, and regularly evaluate psychosocial status as well as have a proactive approach to the management of treatment-related side effects. It is important that people develop a relationship with the entire medical team – not just with the doctor. In these times of managed health care, medical support staff may actually be managing your care more closely than your physician.

Customize Treatment Regime

It is important to customize the treatment regimen to meet the patient's lifestyle so as to make treatment part of, not all of, their lives. When feasible, people should be encouraged to continue working while they are on therapy, as work can help distract from the side effects and may increase their chances of staying on therapy. One specific strategy is to time the injections of pegylated interferon to coincide with potential side effects. For example, for a person who works Monday through Friday, injecting the pegylated interferon on a Friday night will provide the weekend to rest up in case

there are more side effects one or two days after the injection. Another strategy is to include pill organizers that can help keep track of when to take the ribavirin and any other medications.

Medical Providers' Experience

Another key component of adherence is managing the side effects of treatment before they become so severe that it would require a dose reduction or discontinuance of HCV medicines. There are several factors that will increase the likelihood of successfully managing treatment side effects, including the experience of the treating medical provider in managing side effects as well as the patient self-reporting the side effects in a timely manner. The HCV Advocate Website has many side effect management fact sheets that provide a wealth of information about common strategies to help with side effect management. However, it is very important that the side effects are always reported to and managed by a medical provider – the final decision on how to treat side effects should always be made by working closely with the medical team.

Pharmaceutical Help

Pharmaceutical companies are another valuable resource. Roche, Schering and Three Rivers have website and toll-free phone assistance available. The pharmaceutical websites can provide you with many tools, such as email reminders to take the medications or keep medical appointments, and personalized on-line journals to help track side effects and lab work. The pharmaceutical companies usually have an on-call nurse who can help answer questions, provide phone support and even help with insurance reimbursement issues.

Keeping Appointments

It is very important that the person being treated keeps medical appointments and that blood work is routinely performed so that the medical provider can monitor for any potential problems.

Social Support

Staying on treatment sometimes involves pulling together all the resources that are available. This includes

as much support as possible from family, friends and employers. It is highly recommended that a support system be put in place well before the start of therapy. One critical area of successful treatment adherence and outcome is attending a support group. Support groups are a valuable resource for helping with emotional issues that may come up while on therapy. There will be some members of the support group who have been on therapy and they can help with strategies for maintaining your health and managing side effects while on treatment.

Simple Tips:

- Make sure that you are mentally, physically and emotionally prepared to take on treatment so that you can give it all the attention and effort needed.
- Talk to your medical provider before starting treatment and discuss any potential side effects and strategies for managing any side effects that may occur while on therapy.
- Try to plan ahead for any problems that may come up when on treatment that would prevent you from taking all of the medicines. For example, if you plan to travel while on therapy, make sure that you have the means to refrigerate the interferon and that you keep a copy of the prescriptions with you.
- Use a pill box to keep track of and to remember to take ribavirin – try a seven day pill box available at most drug stores. A calendar will help to keep track of the interferon injections.
- Keep a side-effect diary that you can take with you for medical appointments. Report persistent or bothersome side effects as soon as possible. Most of the side effects from treatment can be managed effectively if treated before they become severe.
- Don't forget to enlist the help of family and friends – you don't have to do this alone.
- Drink plenty of water or clear liquids without caffeine. If you don't like the taste of water, try adding a little bit of lemon or orange.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet and try to maintain a healthy weight. Think of food as medicine.
- Try light to moderate exercise everyday if possible.

The Most Valuable Tool

People with hepatitis C has the most valuable tool available – themselves – to help make treatment outcomes successful by being proactive in the management and treatment of HCV. This can be accomplished by using all the resources available to them, including family, peers, nurses, physicians' assistants, nurse practitioners, case managers, pharmacists, psychologists and patient support programs.

The strategies discussed above can help give people a better chance for a successful treatment outcome. However, there are many other factors that influence treatment outcome such as the type of treatment, HCV genotype, weight, HCV viral load, as well as age and race. It is important to remember that not everyone can achieve treatment success no matter how adherent they are to treatment. Although we should all strive for 100% adherence to HCV treatment medications, no one is perfect and there will be times when a person will forget to take a pill or may miss an injection by one day or so. There is nothing to be gained by playing the "blame game" because someone is not 100% adherent – we are only human and perfection is an ideal not a reality. Remember to give it all you have; but try to be gentle with yourself especially while on treatment.

A note about the new direct antivirals that are being developed to treat hepatitis C:

There are two HCV protease inhibitors that are in the later stages of drug development – telaprevir and boceprevir. It is expected that these drugs will be approved in 2011 or 2012. If you are in a clinical trial and taking a new direct HCV antiviral medication be sure to work closely with the clinical trial coordinator to develop strategies to help with adherence to the medications. At this time, there is very little information about HCV medication drug resistance. But it would be wise to assume that there will be some drug resistance since the HCV virus mutates so rapidly. Stay ahead of the game by being as proactive as possible with respect to taking 100% of all of the medications (especially the new HCV direct antivirals), 100% of the time.

Resources:

Roche – Pegasys – Pegassist

www.pegassist.com

Phone: 1-877-PEGASYS (1-877-734-2797)

Schering – Be in Charge

www.beincharge.com

Phone: 1-888-437-2608

Three Rivers Pharmaceuticals

- Ribacare:

www.3riverspharma.com/pat_riba.htm

1-866-650-RIBA

- Aspire (Infergen):

www.infergen.com/7-Resources/1-Aspire.html

Hepatitis C Support Project – National Support Group listing

<http://www.hcvadvocate.org/community/groups.asp>

For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit www.hcvadvocate.org.

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