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disease

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HCV Wellness:

Memory Improvement

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Memory loss, especially short-term memory, occurs commonly as we age. Additionally, patients with hepatitis C virus infection (HCV) sometimes complain of memory problems. Two HCV-related reasons for this are brain fog and hepatic encephalopathy (HE). Brain fog is a non-medical term commonly used to describe a feeling of fogginess that some people who have HCV seem to experience. You won't find the term in a medical reference book yet many HCV patients report having brain fog. The glossary on the Hepatitis C Support Project's web site defines brain fog as "mild mental confusion, memory loss, and/or lack of concentration and alertness." At this point we don't know what causes brain fog, but we do know that people can still function and have meaningful lives in spite of it.

We do understand what causes hepatic encephalopathy. In advanced liver disease the liver cannot properly metabolize and detoxify everything that passes through it, so toxic substances can accumulate in the blood. Ammonia is the most common of these, although other substances can also build up. Ammonia is toxic to the brain and central nervous system, and too much ammonia in the blood can lead to impaired brain function, including changes in behavior and consciousness. There are successful treatments for HE, so anyone with these symptoms needs to be under medical care.

Note: People with moderate to severe HE should not drive and need support in order to get help and manage their lives until treatment restores their ability to think more clearly.

Do not panic if you become forgetful. Panic will only make things worse. It is normal to forget how to add, but abnormal to be confused about the concept of numbers. It is alright to forget where you put your keys; forgetting what your keys do is cause for concern. There are many treatable conditions that can cause cognitive impairment, so it is important to obtain a good medical evaluation before jumping to conclusions. Hearing loss, sleep problems, thyroid disease, psychiatric disorders, stress, vitamin deficiency, alcohol, and drugs are just a few factors that can affect our ability to think, communicate, and function effectively. Always talk to your medical provider about changes in your health.

Just because memory decline is natural does not mean we can't help slow down the process. The brain is like a muscle in that if you don't use it you lose it. An active brain can grow new cells and work more effectively. Here are some ways to keep your brain healthy:

- Be physically active on a daily basis. A combination of stretching, strength training, and aerobic activity is an ideal approach.

- Eat a nutritious diet. Fruits and vegetables, along with other high-value nutritional foods can provide nourishment for our brains. Do not skip meals.
- Drink enough water.
- Manage stress. Meditation and relaxation techniques can help us think more clearly.
- Avoid alcohol and unhealthy substance use.
- Get sufficient sleep. The average adult needs 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night.
- Breathe. Oxygen is essential to our brains.
- Stay mentally active.

How do we stay mentally active? Here are some tips:

- Read more or listen to audio books.
- Do puzzles and brainteasers.
- Learn new things, particularly drawing or painting.
- Go to lectures, plays, museums, or concerts.
- Cut down or eliminate T.V. watching.
- Take up a musical instrument.
- Maintain social and family connections.
- Study a new language.
- Find a hobby.
- Play games.
- Learn to juggle.
- Take adult education classes.
- Learn to dance.
- Deliberately shake up your routine. Rearrange your furniture, drive a different route to familiar places, or wear your watch on your other wrist.

As for forgetfulness, there are techniques that can be used to help us improve our memory. Libraries usually have books on memory improvement. A few suggestions:

- Organize yourself.
- Create habits and routines.
- Write things down and keep your lists in the same place.

- Do one task at a time, rather than multi-tasking.
- Pay attention to what you want to remember.
- Visualize what you want to recall.
- Use repetition to fasten something into your memory bank.
- To remember long lists, create a story or connections between items.


You can use memory devices, also called mnemonics to aid memory. A classic mnemonic is “Thirty days has September, April, June, and November. When short February’s done, all the rest have 31” (used to remember how many days are in each month). Another mnemonic is “My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pickles” (the first letter of each word is also the first letter of the planets in our solar system – Mercury, Venus, Earth, etc) Note: Pluto is no longer a planet. The astronomical community has not agreed on a new mnemonic.

Be sure to check out our complete series on ***HCV Treatment – Side Effect Management***, which can be found at <http://www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets.asp>

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

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