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

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*HCV Wellness:*

## *Stress Reduction*

Lucinda K. Porter, RN

*“Reality is the leading cause of stress for those in touch with it.” – Lily Tomlin*

Stress is unavoidable. Stress is any physical, chemical or emotional factor that places tension on the body, mind or spirit. This tension may disrupt the balance of health and the body’s ability to maintain wellness. There are many types of stress. Work, children, money and traffic are common stressors. Having a chronic illness, such as hepatitis C (HCV), is stressful. Undergoing HCV treatment is physically, emotionally and mentally stressful.

The body is designed to respond to stress. If under pressure to finish a work-related project, then the body may help us by producing stress chemicals, keeping us alert and active. If we have to take a test, the body will provide a little boost that may help us to do well on the exam. We want this stress response.

Stress becomes a potential problem when it is ongoing or intense. If we are under constant deadlines or have too much to handle, the body is not going to be happy. If multiple stress factors visit all at once, this may be distressful.

Research shows that stress interacts with the immune system. Chronic stress may cause immune cells to age prematurely. In its early stages, stress may cause stomach problems, headaches, weight gain or loss, insomnia and other conditions. Chronic stress may contribute to more serious conditions, such as high blood pressure, heart disease or substance abuse.

Managing stress is an integral part of managing HCV and HCV treatment. Although no research states unequivocally that stress has a negative impact on HCV, if stress affects the immune system, then it stands to reason that chronic stress probably does not help HCV patients. Since the goal of treatment is to eliminate HCV by boosting the immune system, then it makes sense to help the immune system by reducing stress.

Recognizing the effects of stress is an important part of stress management. In its early stages, it is common to feel irritable, anxious or angry. Muscles may feel tight, particularly the jaw, neck, and shoulders. It is easy to get upset at the slightest provocation and have sleeping problems. Headaches and stomach problems are more frequent. Heart rate and blood pressure may increase. Smoking, drinking or excessive eating occur with stress. In short, one feels overwhelmed and tense.

*If the effects of stress are severe, get professional help. Anyone with thoughts of suicide or hurting yourself or others needs immediate professional help. If chest pain or symptoms of a stroke or heart attack occur, call 911. We should not drive ourselves to the emergency room.*

Even mild stress may have long-term harmful effects if it is a constant companion. Imagine holding a one-pound rock at arm’s length. Then imagine holding the same rock at arm’s length for days, weeks or months. It would be very painful and damaging. This is much like the effects of chronic stress.

Learning how to manage stress is the best way to avoid these potentially harmful effects. This is especially important to learn prior to starting HCV treatment. The following are some stress management tips. **Note:** *If you do not think you can spare the time to try any of these activities, consider this – you may be more efficient if you manage stress. Also, ask yourself if you can risk getting a stress-related illness.*

- Do not aggravate the situation by turning to smoking, overeating, skipping meals, drinking, or drug use that is not medically supervised.
- Find a physical outlet. Try walking, running, dancing, biking, golfing, swimming, gardening, playing with kids, or yoga. Do this for at least 15 minutes daily. Even better, do this twice a day or increase your activity to 30 or 45 minutes.
- Maintain good nutrition. Try to eat a low fat, high fiber diet. If you are short on time, fast food restaurants now

offer healthy alternatives to the usual fried fare.

- Find ways to relax and turn your mind off. Spend time with friends and family. Go to the movies, play some music, watch a sporting event, play cards, read a magazine, take a hot bath, go to a favorite restaurant, get a massage, light a candle, do a crossword puzzle, read the comics.
- Attend a stress-management class. Some employers, HMOs, health insurance and adult education services offer stress management classes.
- Talk about it. Sometimes others can see ways to improve our situation.
- Learn to meditate.
- Put a positive spin on things. Don't turn little things into big things. Try saying to yourself, "This too shall pass."
- Help others. Sometimes the best way to get out of our head is to help someone else.
- Let others help you. Perhaps you can off-load some of your responsibilities.
- Set limits. Remember that the word "no" is a complete sentence.
- Take issues one task at a time, one minute at a time. Don't overwhelm yourself by thinking about everything you have to do. Make a list and focus on what you can accomplish. Be realistic. Prioritize. Put your health at the top of the list.
- Prune your "to do" list. Ask yourself if something really has to be done. If not, take it off the list.
- To deal with long lines and waiting times, bring along a puzzle or something to read.
- Avoid others who increase your stress.
- Practice acceptance. Let go of what is unchangeable.
- Find ways to laugh. When we laugh the body produces helpful stress hormones. "He who laughs, lasts."

## Resources

### The American Institute of Stress

[www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org)

### American Psychological Association - Anger Management

[www.apa.org/topics/anger/control.aspx](http://www.apa.org/topics/anger/control.aspx)

### Anger Management Techniques

[www.anger-management-techniques.org](http://www.anger-management-techniques.org)

### Free Meditations

[www.freemeditations.com](http://www.freemeditations.com)

### HCSP Factsheet – HCV Wellness: Meditation

[www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets\\_pdf/Meditation.pdf](http://www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/Meditation.pdf)

### Mayo Clinic

[www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress/SR99999](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress/SR99999)

### Medline

[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html)

### Self-Care for Hepatitis C: Applied Meditation for a Healthy Liver CD by Margo Adair and Robin Roth

[www.hepCmeditations.org](http://www.hepCmeditations.org)

### HCSP Factsheet – The Liver: Stress and the Liver

[www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets\\_pdf/stress\\_liver.pdf](http://www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/stress_liver.pdf)

### Stressbusting

[www.stressbusting.co.uk](http://www.stressbusting.co.uk)

### World Wide Online Meditation Center

[www.meditationcenter.com](http://www.meditationcenter.com)

**For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit [www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org).**

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### Executive Director

#### Editor-in-Chief, HCSP Publications

Alan Franciscus

### Design

Paula Fener

### Production

C.D. Mazoff, PhD

### Contact information:

Hepatitis C Support Project

PO Box 427037

San Francisco, CA 94142-7037

[alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org](mailto:alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org)

The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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