

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

Women and HCV: The Cosmetic Side Effects of HCV Treatment

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SUCCESS RATES FOR THE TREATMENT OF HEPATITIS C

viral infection (HCV) are steadily improving. Women have a slightly higher success rate than men. A favorable outcome depends on finishing the entire course of treatment at the maximum dose for your medical condition. Although this is encouraging, HCV treatment has side effects. Sometimes these side effects can interfere with a person's ability to stay at their recommended dose of medication or to finish the treatment.

Most of the side effects of HCV treatment can be managed. Early intervention is important so the side effects don't become big problems. Some of the side effects are cosmetic in nature. They aren't serious and they may not be painful, but they are bothersome. No one likes to admit they have some vanity. However, no one likes the thought of some of the cosmetic changes that occur during treatment.

Most of these changes can be managed successfully. All of the cosmetic side effects are temporary. When patients are done with treatment, they usually say that the cosmetic changes were the least of their problems.

Side Effects

If you ask women which cosmetic side effect they fear the most, hair loss would top the list. Most patients think this means baldness, but nothing could be further from the truth. Hair loss becomes noticeable about 3 months after starting HCV treatment. The loss is evenly distributed around the head and the term "thinning" is a better description of what

occurs. Patients notice hair on their brushes, their pillows, or in the sink long before they notice it missing from their heads. The hair loss is usually not apparent to anyone other than the patient. It is most noticeable on patients who start with thin hair. Patients who have very thick hair may even like the change.

Unfortunately, another side effect, depression, may also start to set in at about the same time a patient's hair begins to thin. This depression is physiological, caused by the HCV medications. Patients can have a hard time feeling good about themselves because their brains are not making enough "feel good" chemicals. Thinning hair can feel like a final straw.

These side effects will go away after HCV treatment has stopped. Your hair will grow back, your nails will get stronger, and your skin will regain its natural oils. If you lost weight, this will also return to your pre-treatment levels. If you like the weight loss, then you can prevent a weight gain with exercise and diet changes.

The following are some tips for common cosmetic side effects:

Hair Loss

- Try washing your hair less often.
- Avoid tight braiding or hair weaves.
- If you use chemicals on your hair, ask for the mildest product, or even skip them altogether.
- Avoid or reduce your use of hair dryers, curling irons, and rollers.
- Keep your hair conditioned; use moisturizers and detangling products.
- Use hair products that add body and texture.
- Some people recommend Nioxin products, which can be purchased at salons or beauty supply stores. For maximum effect, begin using them before you start treatment.
- Comb and brush your hair less; choose a soft brush or wide-tooth comb.
- Do not "tease" or "back-comb" your hair.
- Try a shorter or different hairstyle.
- Protect your hair with a hat, scarf, or hair sunscreen products.
- Use a satin pillow when you sleep.
- Splurge on hats and scarves that accentuate your best features.
- Wear a hair piece or wig.

- Ask your medical provider to evaluate and treat you for depression, if necessary.

Dry skin/rashes

- Dry, itchy skin is a common complaint. Make a commitment to care for your skin at the very beginning of treatment.
- Have all rashes evaluated.
- Drink sufficient water.
- Avoid soap. Use Cetaphil™ cleanser or a similar substitute.
- Hypoallergenic creams and lotions applied immediately following bathing can reduce dry skin. Creams are generally more effective than lotions. Add a couple of drops of unscented, lightweight oil to the lotion for extra protection.
- Avoid prolonged sun exposure. Use high SPF sun protection.
- Scratching leads to more itching. Avoid scratching, especially with fingernails. Cold packs or pressure can be applied to itchy areas.
- Try to avoid chapped lips by lubricating frequently, especially with a product that contains sunscreen.
- Injection site redness is extremely common. Rotate injection sites. Report any signs of infection, such as red lines running along your skin, or an area that is swollen or hot to the touch.
- If you want to wear a bathing suit that exposes your thighs or a top that shows your midriff, make a choice of one over the other. Injection site redness is so common that it is likely that you will not want to walk around exposing red blotches on your skin. For instance, if you are planning a beach vacation where you want to wear a one-piece bathing suit, confine your injections to your abdomen starting about 4 weeks prior to the event. Start rotating the sites after you return.

Dry, brittle nails

- Keep nails short.
- Use hand lotions and creams as much as possible, and especially after your hands have been in water.
- Wear gloves to protect hands when doing chores such as dishwashing, cleaning, gardening, or using chemicals.
- At bedtime, apply oils or thick creams to your hands. Smear extra on your nails. Wear cotton gloves while you sleep to protect your sheets and clothing.
- If you polish your nails, use gentle polish removers.
- Avoid nail polish altogether. Use nail strengtheners and buffing.

- If you have your nails professionally manicured, know how to keep others as well as yourself safe from blood-borne viruses. See the HCSP Factsheet *Preventing HCV Transmission in Personal Care Settings*

Excessive or Unwanted Weight Loss

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Choose foods that are high in calories and protein. Try products designed to promote weight gain, such as nutritional supplements. Instant breakfast powders, high-calorie puddings, and “shakes” can be easy to digest. For extra calories, add powdered milk to regular milk, soups, mashed potatoes, hot cereal, and puddings. Peanut butter is an excellent source of nutrition and calories.
- Consult a nutritionist for further advice.
- For more on this topic, see the following HCSP Factsheets: *HCV Treatment Side Effect Management: Weight Loss*; *HCV Treatment Side Effect Management: Nausea*; *HCV Treatment Side Effect Management: Taste Changes*.


Support groups can help women and men cope with HCV, its treatment, and its impact on their lives. See if there is a support group near where you live:

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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