

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

HCV Wellness:

Nutrition and Hepatitis C

Alan Franciscus, Editor-in-Chief

In the past, diet modification was seen as an important part of liver disease management; this is less true today. However, recent data suggest that steatosis (fatty infiltrates of the liver) contribute to liver disease progression and lower HCV medical treatment response. Poor diet and little or no exercise greatly contribute to the formation of steatosis. Therefore it is recommended that people with hepatitis C eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, drink plenty of clear fluids, engage in moderate exercise and get plenty of rest.

Diet

A diet that follows the general guidelines for good nutrition based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans is generally recommended for people with stable chronic hepatitis C. Balancing the food you eat with physical activity is also recommended. Once someone develops cirrhosis it is very important that a liver disease specialist and a nutritionist be consulted.

Drinking enough clear fluids is also important to incorporate into a healthy diet. Water is often called the ‘silent nutrient’ because it provides needed minerals and essential fluids to keep us healthy. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommends that the general daily fluid intake should be 91 ounces for women and 125 ounces for men. Fluid intake can come from food, water, and other drinks. A good rule of thumb is to make sure that you drink when thirsty.

A healthy diet is low in fat, cholesterol, and sodium (salt), high in complex carbohydrates, and has adequate protein. Most people can obtain adequate nutrients by eating a well-balanced diet. Some people with HCV find various nutritional supplements beneficial. However, certain vitamins and minerals (e.g., vitamin A, vitamin D, iron, and niacin) can be harmful to the liver in high doses. People with hepatitis C should consult their healthcare provider – and perhaps also a trained dietitian or nutritionist – before starting any new diet.



Some people with hepatitis C experience loss of appetite (anorexia), nausea, and diarrhea; these may also occur as side effects of the drugs used to treat HCV. Many people find it helpful to eat small, frequent healthy meals and snacks rather than three large meals each day. Soft or liquid foods and foods at room temperature (neither hot nor cold) may be easier to tolerate, while spicy or fatty foods may worsen nausea. If a person is unable to obtain enough nutrients by eating normally, liquid nutritional supplements (such as Advera, Ensure, or Sustacal) can be used.

The following is speculative, but is nutritionally sound: Because the liver processes and detoxifies everything a person eats, avoiding certain foods may help reduce the liver's work load.

Most experts recommend that people with HCV avoid consumption of raw or undercooked shellfish (which can contain hepatitis A and other viruses and bacteria). Processed foods may contain chemical additives and high levels of sodium, so people with HCV may benefit from limiting consumption of canned, frozen, or preserved foods, as well as fast foods. All meat, fruits and vegetables should be washed to remove harmful residues. Wash hands thoroughly before and after handling food. People with HCV should read food labels and familiarize themselves with ingredients.

It is often recommended that people with HCV should avoid foods high in fat, salt, or sugar. Some people with HCV find it difficult to tolerate dairy products; if this is the case, soy milk or rice milk may be good substitutes. Some experts believe protein from vegetables, dairy products, fish, or chicken may be easier to process than protein from meat. However, adequate protein is important for body tissue maintenance and repair.

You may not have a lot of control over what hepa-

titis C does to your body, but you can help keep yourself healthier by eating a healthy diet, which will strengthen the immune system and help fight hepatitis C.

The Dietary Guidelines for American's recommendations have been revised to include many factors such as age, sex and physical activity. In addition there are very practical tips and suggestions on how to eat healthily, a system to keep track of what you eat and various resources and links. To learn more information about nutrition and the food pyramid guide, visit www.choosemyplate.gov/

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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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