

Hepatitis C treatment: combination therapy



FACTSHEET 03

Hepatitis Council of Qld

“ It took me about 3 years to decide to the treatment... It took a few months to feel back to normal after finishing ... but it worked. I feel so good that I want everyone to feel like this too! I can only describe it as a feeling of being brand new...It really is the best thing I've ever done and has changed my life in many positive ways”

What treatment is available for hepatitis C?

Treatment currently available for people with hepatitis C is **pegylated interferon** and **ribavirin**; commonly called '*combination therapy*' when both drugs are used together. Using combination therapy involves injecting pegylated interferon into the fatty tissue under the skin once a week and taking ribavirin tablets daily, for either six or 12 months.

Pegylated interferon *monotherapy* is also available for people who cannot tolerate ribavirin (i.e. if you have an allergic reaction to it), although this has a lower success rate in clearing the virus.

How effective is it?

There are different hepatitis C sub-types or genotypes. Your liver specialist can do a blood test to tell you what genotype you have.

Combination therapy is highly effective:

- **About 80% of people with genotype 2 or 3;** and
- **50% of people with genotype 1,** who finish treatment will clear the virus.

What affects my response to treatment?

Some of the things that can affect your response to treatment are:

- **Genotype** – genotypes 2 and 3 respond better than 1 and 4;
- Taking your medication at the right time and completing the **full course of treatment**;
- **Age** – younger people may respond better than older people;
- **Viral load** – the lower the viral load, the higher the chance of responding to treatment;
- **Weight** – people in a healthy weight range may respond better than those who are overweight;
- **Alcohol** consumption – the less alcohol you drink, the more likely you are to respond to treatment; and
- **Rapid Virological Response (RVR)** – people who respond early to treatment are more likely to clear the virus.

Ultimately though, many people have responded to treatment even with all the odds against them. The important thing is to make an informed decision about whether treatment is right for you, and to focus on the things you *can* control, like alcohol consumption and weight.

How does it work?

Interferon's are a group of proteins made naturally by your body in response to viral infections. They work by helping your body to fight the virus and prevent the virus from multiplying. Pegylated interferon is a man-made version of natural interferon. Ribavirin helps to slow the speed that the hepatitis C virus makes copies of itself.

The ABC of Hepatitis Training Package is an initiative of Queensland Health through funding provided by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing under the National Hepatitis C Prevention and Education Initiative

Updated: 29 June 2009

For more information www.hepqld.asn.au
or Hepatitis Council of Qld info line **1800 648 491**

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How long does treatment last for?

For people with genotype 2 or 3 without cirrhosis or bridging fibrosis (scarred liver tissue), treatment lasts for 24 weeks (six months). For people with genotype 1 or 4, and people with genotype 2 or 3 with cirrhosis or bridging fibrosis, treatment lasts for up to 48 weeks (12 months).

How can I get this treatment?

Liver clinics provide hepatitis C treatment. First you must ask your general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a liver clinic to see a specialist.

How much does it cost?

If you meet the following criteria, most of the treatment costs are paid for by the government:

- Chronic hepatitis C infection (shown through PCR testing);
- Contraception (women must not be pregnant or breastfeeding; and both the person going on treatment and their partner must use effective forms of contraception—one each);
- Age: people must be 18 years or over.

However, you are still required to make a *co-payment* of about \$30 per month, or \$4 per month if you have a Health Care Card.

If you have previously been treated with any interferon therapy for hepatitis C but did not achieve a sustained virological response (either through non-response or relapse), you are now able to undergo **retreatment** with a course of pegylated interferon and ribavirin.

What are the side effects?

The side-effects of treatment are significant and can include things like nausea, fatigue, muscle

pain, chills, fevers, anaemia, skin conditions, and sometimes psychological issues such as memory loss, apathy and depression.

For these reasons the decision to undertake treatment should not be made lightly as side-effects may impact home-life and work. However, there are many things you can do to manage these side-effects. You will also be monitored carefully throughout treatment by the liver clinic team and it is important to arrange as much support as possible from family or friends before treatment.

Interested in finding out more?

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Organisations

- The Hepatitis Council of Qld has a range of booklets and information available on hepatitis C treatment
- Your GP
- Your local liver clinic (see factsheet 34 for clinic listings and how to get a referral)

Before starting treatment many people talk to the Hepatitis Council of Queensland, seek information, set up a treatment plan and talk to people who have experienced treatment first hand

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