

Treatment

- The most important action for a person to take when considering entering into treatment for hepatitis C is to talk over the options with a person that they can trust. For people who do not feel able to talk to their doctor, contacting a help line or speaking to another person living with hepatitis C is a great start.
- Before a person can access treatment they will need to find out (from a Doctor) what genotype of the virus they have and how long the virus has been present. This helps the Doctor to decide on the most suitable treatment.
- The current treatment regimen for hepatitis C is a combination of two drugs; pegylated interferon and ribavirin:
 - Interferons are small proteins made by the body to help it fight viral infections such as common colds or hepatitis. The body makes different types of interferons to fight different infections. There are two types of artificially made interferons used to fight the hepatitis C virus. Pegylated interferon is made when a chemical called polyethylene glycol (PEG) is attached to interferon. PEG helps the interferon to work in the body for longer.
 - Ribavirin is a type of drug that works against some viruses. It needs to be taken with interferon to help it to work against the hepatitis C virus. In this combined treatment ribavirin can improve people's liver function tests (blood tests which show how well the liver is working) and improve people's chances of clearing hepatitis C.
- There are specific criteria that need to be met before a person can engage in treatment. These include:
 - If a person has not received treatment before or has been unsuccessfully treated with monotherapy, the following criteria for treatment (which are listed under the Highly Specialised Drug Treatment Program Section 100 of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme) apply:
 - A positive antibody test for hepatitis C
 - Must not be breast feeding or pregnant
 - Heterosexual partners must take precautions to prevent pregnancy when either partner is on treatment and for 6 to 12 months after treatment

Starting Treatment

- Starting treatment requires a great deal of preparation as the side effects from the treatment alone can be debilitating. The treatment requires a commitment of many months. Side effects include but are not limited to:

Interferon:

- feeling like you have the flu, such as headaches, muscle aches, joint aches, fevers/chills and feeling sick;
- vomiting, loss of appetite, diarrhea;
- dry skin, dry eyes, dry mouth, hair loss;
- less energy, feeling tired, difficulty sleeping;
- depression, mood swings, poor concentration, vagueness; and
- some people also have changes in their blood such as less white blood cells and platelets (clotting blood cells) and thyroid problems.

Ribavirin:

- Studies have found that ribavirin may be associated with birth defects. It is a requirement of treatment that effective birth control needs to be used by both the person undergoing treatment and their partner while taking the treatments and for six months afterwards, ribavirin has been found in semen.
- Ribavirin may cause anaemia (a low number of red blood cells in the blood). Anaemia can cause shortness of breath and feeling light headed and tired.
- People who have heart or lung disease or who are over 60 years old may need to have extra tests before taking ribavirin or they may not be able to take it at all.
- Ribavirin can also cause symptoms such as nausea or vomiting so it should be taken with meals.