

Diet and healthy eating with hepatitis C

For many people eating is one of life's basic pleasures. A well-balanced diet provides us with the energy to get through our day. It also:

- boosts our immune system
- helps to maintain a healthy weight
- reduces the risk of many diseases such as heart disease, obesity and some cancers.

Unless they have advanced liver disease, the dietary recommendations for people with hepatitis C are the same as for the general population: follow a diet that is high in fibre, includes plenty of wholegrain, fruit and vegetables, and is reduced in fats.

There is a lot of information on the internet and in the community suggesting that people with hepatitis C need a special diet, but there is presently no research to back this up. Diet on its own doesn't appear to make any difference to the progression of hepatitis C in the body, although there is some evidence that being overweight causes liver disease to progress more rapidly. There is however anecdotal evidence that people with hepatitis C often feel sick after eating meals or food with a high fat content.

People with advanced liver disease and/or other illnesses that can be impacted by diet should seek expert advice about their dietary needs. People with diabetes and hepatitis C should see a dietician (through a diabetes self management program) or consult their diabetes nurse.

Healthy eating

Choosing fresh, nutritious foods will help your body to function at its best. To get a balanced intake of the vitamins and minerals you need, eat some food from each of the five food groups every day, varying your choices from day to day.

The five foods groups are:

- grains - bread, cereals, rice, pasta and noodles.
- fruit and vegetables.
- fats, oils and sugars.
- dairy - milk, yoghurt and cheese.
- protein – red meat, fish, poultry, eggs, nuts and legumes.

Dairy foods

Dairy foods are an excellent source of nutrients such as calcium, protein, riboflavin and vitamin B12. Some dairy foods contain high levels of saturated fat (fat from animals). If you want to reduce your intake of saturated fat, try choosing reduced-fat or fat-free dairy products or calcium enriched soy milk products.

Red meat

Lean red meat is a valuable source of iron, zinc protein and B group vitamins. There is no evidence suggesting that people with hepatitis C are adversely affected by eating red meat, but avoiding meats with high fat content is good advice.

Fats

Fat is a major source of energy and aids your body in absorbing vitamins. It's important for proper growth development and keeping you healthy. Fat provides taste to foods and helps you to feel full. Fats are an especially important source of calories and nutrients.

People with hepatitis C don't need to exclude fats or oils completely as everyone needs some fats in their diet. But not all fats are the same; you should avoid saturated fat if you can. Saturated fat is found mostly in animal products. This may include fat from beef, veal, lamb, pork, poultry, lard, butter, cream, milk, cheese and other dairy products made from whole or reduced fat milk.

Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are unsaturated fats. They're found mainly in many fish, nuts, seeds and oils from plants.

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Some examples of foods that contain these fats include salmon, trout, herring, avocados, olives, walnuts and liquid vegetable oils such as soybean, corn, canola, olive and sunflower.

Unsaturated fats are a healthier choice than saturated fats.

For people with hepatitis C the risk of developing cirrhosis of the liver appears to be higher if they are overweight or obese, or have a condition known as fatty liver. Maintaining a healthy weight for your age and height may decrease the risk of developing cirrhosis.

Salt

All people in Australia are advised to eat less salt whether they have hepatitis C or not. You can do this by using less or no salt in cooking, reducing salt used at the table and buying low salt foods.

Food colours and preservatives

There is no evidence to suggest that people with hepatitis C have particular problems metabolising artificial colours or preservatives in foods. Avoiding all artificial colours, flavours and preservatives can severely limit shopping choices. This could add unnecessary stress without significant health benefits.

Sugar

There's no research to show that people with hepatitis C have problems metabolising (processing) sugar. Sugar enhances the flavour of foods and is a source of energy. A lot of foods naturally contain sugar, including fruit and milk, while manufactured foods often have processed sugars added. Many foods with large amounts of sugar also contain high amounts of fat. Sugar, sweets and cakes are very low in nutrients and fill you up. This increases loss of appetite, making eating more nutritious foods difficult. It is better to get your energy from nutrient-rich foods such as wholegrain breads and cereals, meats, fruits, nuts, fish, or vegetables.

Vitamin and mineral supplements

Any illness may cause your body to need more vitamins and minerals. If you are eating a well-balanced diet you should be getting enough vitamins and minerals from your food. However, supplements may be useful if your appetite, or your diet, is poor. But be careful not to exceed the recommended dose, as this may be harmful.

Alcohol

Alcohol is a toxin that is broken down by the liver.

Alcohol is a significant factor in the health and well-being of people with hepatitis C. It contributes to the development of cirrhosis of the liver and reduces hepatitis C treatment success rates.

It is not clear how much alcohol is safe for people so it is generally recommended that people with hepatitis C drink as little as they can.

For heavy drinkers with hepatitis C, the risk of developing cirrhosis of the liver is higher than normal. Alcohol also stimulates the buildup of fat in the liver, and the development of fibrosis (scarring of the liver).

Reducing or stopping alcohol intake is one the most effective health promotion strategies people with hepatitis C can do.

Some strategies that may assist you in reducing your alcohol intake are:

- switch to low alcohol or alcohol free drinks
- mix your drink with plain mineral water
- avoid situations where there may be pressure to drink alcohol
- alternate a non-alcoholic drink with an alcoholic one
- seek support from a local alcohol and drug agency.

Tea and coffee

There is no published scientific evidence suggesting that tea, coffee or other caffeine-containing drinks, when consumed in moderation cause particular problems for people with hepatitis C. However, the active ingredient, caffeine does produce side effects such as increased alertness that may interfere with sleep patterns. These effects are usually temporary.

Further nutritional information

If you have a level of liver damage or symptoms that require more specialised dietary advice, your doctor or specialist should be able to refer you to a relevant dietician.

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Dealing with nausea

Some people with hepatitis C report often feeling nausea, loss of appetite and other gastrointestinal symptoms. These symptoms can be related to your body's immune response to the hepatitis C virus, as well as to liver disease. There are things that you can do that may relieve nausea:

- Ginger, peppermint, fennel seed and aniseed teas can help reduce bloating and abdominal cramps. Make ginger tea by grating about one inch of fresh ginger into a cup and adding hot water.
- Increased acid in your stomach can add to discomfort so avoid orange, lemon or other citrus.
- Small sips of fluid are easier to swallow than solids.
- Try eating smaller meals, more often.
- Soups and broth can be easier to eat and digest.
- Dry toast or crackers can help settle your stomach if you are nauseated in the morning.
- Try not to skip meals. An empty stomach can make nausea worse.

If nausea and loss of appetite persist, consult your doctor or a dietician.

Useful contacts

Hepatitis Victoria

Hepatitis Infoline 1800 703 003

Email: info@hepvic.org.au

Web: www.hepvic.org.au

Useful publications

Hepatitis C: Guide to healthy living

Living with cirrhosis

Both these publications are available from Hepatitis Victoria.

Useful website

The Better Health Channel:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Victorian Department of Human Services consumer health information website for information about all aspects of health, including complementary and alternative medicine.

This infosheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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