



## HEPATITIS C

Information, advice, testing,  
support & training service

Side effects –skin, nails, hair and eyes

### ***Skin Rashes and Itching***

It seems like almost every patient undergoing HCV treatment develops some type of skin problem. The most common is caused by ribavirin, sometimes called a “ribavirin rash.” Skin problems are usually not serious, but can be very annoying. Interferon can induce underlying autoimmune skin diseases such as psoriasis. Consult with your clinical specialist or a dermatologist (skin specialist) if you develop skin problems during treatment. It is even more important to see a specialist if there is any redness, swelling, or accumulation of fluid or pus, which could indicate an infection.

Interferon and ribavirin can cause dry skin, so it is not surprising that most people suffer from this side effect during treatment. Symptoms may range from mild dry flaky skin to severe skin irritation including bumps and blisters. The itching associated with rashes is usually mildly annoying. At its extreme, itching can be so irritating that it interferes with quality of life. Itching tends to be worse in the evening and may interfere with sleep.

Generally, skin rashes are not particularly dangerous, except in cases where infections develop from scratching. Avoid scratching; if you must scratch, never use your fingernails or sharp objects, since this can lead to infection. This is especially important for people on therapy, since interferon can lower the white blood cell count, which hypothetically can lead to a greater chance of infection.

### ***Tips for combating dry skin and itching:***

- Avoid soap. Use a non-soap cleanser
- Try rubbing, vibration or applying pressure instead of scratching. A good thing to “scratch” with is an ice cube
- Drink plenty of water or other clear fluids to keep your entire body hydrated
- Apply moisturizer immediately after a shower or bath before drying off with a towel
- Creams are more effective moisturizers than lotions
- Apply moisturizer at least twice a day. Effective moisturizers include Vaseline Intensive Care and E45
- Use only non-perfumed, mild bath and personal care products
- Avoid extremely hot showers and baths
- Take an oatmeal bath to relieve itching and help with relaxation
- Try baking soda or unscented bath oils for bathing

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- Apply cold packs (wrapped in a towel) to the skin
- Whenever possible, wear loose fitting clothes made from natural fabrics that breathe
- Protect your skin from the sun wear sunscreen
- Look after your lips use lip balm with sunscreen
- Get plenty of rest
- Keep rooms ventilated and at a temperature of 60 to 70 degrees

For mild itching or rashes, ask your clinical specialist if you can use an over-the-counter topical hydrocortisone cream. Do not use hydrocortisone on your face or for prolonged periods unless directed to do so by your doctor. Oral antihistamines such as Piriton can relieve itching and also help with sleep problems.

### ***Injection Site Reactions***

Some people experience a generalized skin reaction in the area where they inject their interferon. If you experience continued pain, swelling, irritation, or infection at the injection site, consult a clinical specialist immediately. Fortunately, the most common injection site reactions are mild and more of a nuisance than a serious problem. However, it is important to follow the necessary steps to ensure that you are using the correct injection technique.

#### ***Tips for safe injection:***

- Review injection techniques found in the medication package insert
- Wash your hands with soap and water before injecting to prevent infection
- Make sure the medication is at room temperature
- Make sure that the area to be injected is clean and sterile
- If using swabs let the area dry for 10 minutes before injecting
- The easiest and least painful areas to inject include the abdomen and thighs; avoid injecting into the waistline or too close to the navel
- Do not massage the injection site
- After injecting, cover the site with a bandage
- Clothing can irritate the injection site, so wear loose natural fabrics
- Topical creams can help with minor irritations
- Rotate injection sites—use a different place each time you inject. Some people alternate between the stomach and the thigh to make sure they do not accidentally inject in the same spot twice in a row

### ***Nail Changes***

HCV therapy can affect your fingernails and, to a lesser extent, toenails. Nails may become dry and brittle. They may also develop ridges and may break easily.

### ***Tips for taking care of your nails:***

- Keep nails short
- Use hand lotions and creams as often as possible, especially after your hands have been in water
- Wear gloves to protect your hands when doing chores such as dishwashing, cleaning, gardening, or using chemicals
- At bedtime, apply oils or thick creams. 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
- Better yet, avoid nail polish and other harsh nail products altogether
- Use nail strengtheners and try buffing to bring out a shine

**Important Note: If you have your nails professionally manicured, know how to keep others as well as yourself safe from blood-borne viruses. Tools that can break the skin or that may come into contact with blood should be used on only one person or thoroughly cleaned between clients.**

### ***Hair Loss***

Some hair loss is common for healthy people. In fact, the average person loses between 50 and 150 hairs each day. Hair loss can be caused by many different factors, including heredity, harsh hair treatments, and various medical conditions. Interferon therapy can cause excessive hair loss (alopecia) and changes in hair texture. Such changes may occur all over the body, not just on the head. It is rare for a person on interferon to lose all of his or her hair or go bald, but many people notice that their hair is thinning, or that it is becoming brittle and breaking off.

Hair color may become dull and hair texture may change during therapy curly hair may even become straight or vice-versa.

Treatment-related hair loss and changes in texture may affect body image and mood, so it is highly recommended that people seek professional psychological support or help from a peer-led support group. The good news is that hair loss and changes in hair texture are only temporary. The hair will usually grow back after treatment is completed. Sometimes people even report that their hair grows back fuller and thicker than before.

### ***Tips to reduce hair loss and related problems:***

- Do not wash your hair too frequently
- Avoid the chemicals found in dyes and perms use natural products. If you do use chemicals on your hair, choose the mildest products available
- A short, layered haircut will make hair look thicker and fuller
- Keep your hair conditioned; use moisturizers and detangling products. For maximum effect, begin using conditioner before you start HCV treatment
- Use hair products that add body and texture

- Avoid hair dryers, rollers, and curling irons
- Comb and brush your hair less; choose a soft brush or wide-tooth comb
- Do not “tease” or “back-comb” your hair
- Use a sunscreen, hat, or scarf to protect your scalp and hair from sun damage. Splurge on hats and scarves that accentuate your best features
- Avoid hairstyles that could strain your hair, such as hair weaves or braiding

### ***Eye Problems***

Some rare but serious eye problems can occur during HCV treatment, so early diagnosis and intervention is essential. A clinical specialist should evaluate any vision or eye problems.

**Important Note: A loss or decrease of vision requires immediate medical attention.**

Some common eye problems are not immediately serious. Dryness is one of these. Talk to your clinical specialist about the use of preservative-free nonprescription artificial tears. Some people report that the quality of their eyesight diminishes during HCV treatment. This may be due to dry eyes, fatigue, normal aging, or medication. Again, talk to your clinical specialist if this is a concern.

A baseline eye exam before you start HCV treatment is recommended. Your eyes should return to normal in the weeks and months following the end of therapy. Exceptions to this are changes due to normal aging and possibly some rare or untreated medical problems.