Hepatitis C Treatment and Methadone or Buprenorphine

Access to free hepatitis C treatment is available for people who are on methadone or buprenorphine. Being on a drug treatment program and/or being a current or ex illicit/injecting drug user does not exclude you from treatment as long as you meet the other criteria (see fact sheet on “Hepatitis C Access Criteria” for further information). Recent research has shown excellent results for people on methadone successfully completing hepatitis C treatment with this research also showing promise with similar results expected for buprenorphine and hepatitis C treatment. Other research into hepatitis C treatment has shown encouraging results for people who are (or have been) illicit/injecting drug users, considering just a few years ago current drug users were excluded from hepatitis C treatment.

The research into hepatitis C treatment for people on methadone has, among the many encouraging conclusions, included:

- The success rate of hepatitis C treatment for people on methadone is similar to that of people who are not taking methadone;
- Interferon (used in monotherapy and combination therapy) does not alter the effects of methadone; and
- Methadone does not alter the effects of interferon.

Although this particular research project only looked at methadone treatment, similar results are expected for those on buprenorphine. Authors of the study include a number of points in their discussion paper that people on methadone or buprenorphine who are considering hepatitis C treatment should be aware of and consider discussing with their treatment specialist.

These include:

- the methadone dose of 45% of the patients was increased by an average of 15mg while on hepatitis C treatment;
- 24% of patients surveyed discontinued treatment early with the most common reason being severity of side effects including psychological side effects (depression etc);
- at the beginning of treatment 47% of patients were taking anti-depressants and by the end of treatment this had risen to 89% of patients in the study;

For some people receiving treatment it was reported that the flu like side effects resembled those of opioid withdrawal. Although not a proven scientific outcome, theoretically there is the possibility of an increased risk of illicit drug use as a means to manage side effects. For past illicit drug users this is a possibility to be aware of, be prepared for, and have a strategy worked out as to how to deal with this situation if it arises.
The important factors that come from this research are that treatment can be successful and that although there are certain difficulties and challenges these are manageable and can be overcome with help and support. It is particularly important for people who have experienced a mental health problem in the past to ensure they have adequate support for managing the emotional side effects, and if needed, discuss with the doctor options for medication that will help with these symptoms. Your local drug user organisation can provide advice and/or referrals for people on methadone or buprenorphine and current and ex-users that are considering or undergoing hepatitis C treatment.

Access to treatment is decided by the hepatitis C specialist and unfortunately people who are or have been drug users can face discrimination and can be excluded. If this has happened to you or someone you know you have a right to appeal this decision. Your local drug user organisation will be able to help you with such issues.

Managing Hepatitis C Treatment & Methadone/Buprenorphine

Being on two different treatments can have its challenges but with support, advice and careful planning these can be managed.

There are a variety of side effects from hepatitis C treatment (see fact sheet on “Managing Side Effects of Treatment” for further information) with people experiencing these to very different degrees. Regardless of whether you experience mild or extreme side effects there are many strategies that can be used to help.

Forgetfulness can be a side effect experienced from treatment. There are practical strategies you can use to reduce the impact of forgetfulness such as:

- Using a diary or calendar will help with remembering your doctors and other health care appointments, key dates for things such as script renewals for both your hepatitis C treatment and for your methadone/buprenorphine treatment;
- Diaries and calendars can also be used to write down the times that medication needs to be taken and to mark off when you administer your interferon injection each week;
- Putting stickers with reminders on different items around the house; and
- Using pill dispensers for your Ribavirin with days and dosing times marked so you can see which doses you have taken and when.
Some of the side effect from treatment can feel similar to withdrawing from opiates (heroin, methadone/buprenorphine, morphine etc). If you are free from illicit drug use and want to stay that way, this can be a difficult and challenging experience. Seeking extra support from a drug and alcohol counsellor will help you to stay focussed on your goals. If you don't have a drug and alcohol counsellor your local drug user organisation can help you find one. Your doctor or nurse will also help with managing these and other side effects.

A dry mouth is a common side effect of methadone or buprenorphine. The bad news is that it is also a side effect of hepatitis C treatment. The good news is that it is an easy side effect to manage by drinking plenty of fluids and chewing, sugar free gum. A dry mouth can be devastating to the health of your teeth so taking extra steps to look after you teeth is important. Brush regularly using a soft brush after every meal and use a good anti-bacterial mouth wash (check ingredients as some mouth wash brands contain alcohol and this will dry your mouth more). You should also floss your teeth regularly and try to reduce the amount of sugary foods that you eat. (For further information on hepatitis C, opioid use and dental health see the AIVL Fast Facts series on this issue.)

Many side effects can go away or lessen in severity after a few weeks. Some people are extremely fortunate and not only do they not experience side effects, they actually feel better while on treatment. While this is a fairly rare experience you can feel confident in the knowledge that getting rid of the virus will definitely make you feel better.

Information adapted from:

www.hcvadvocate.org

The impact of barriers to hepatitis C virus treatment in recovering heroin users maintained on methadone. Diana L. Sylvestre et al, 2004

Treatment of HCV in the Methadone Patient; Diana L. Sylvestre; article from www.hcvadvocate.org

Pharmacokinetics, Pharmacodynamics and Antiviral Response in Patients with Chronic Hepatitis C Infection on Methadone Maintenance Therapy Receiving Pegasys (peginterferon alfa-2a) MS Sulknowsi and others.  

Pharmacokinetics, Pharmacodynamics and Antiviral Response in Patients with Chronic Hepatitis C Infection on Methadone Maintenance