Internet Surfing for Your Health  By Lisa Townshend ANP

The internet is filled with information. When I am looking information up on the internet, I wonder, What should I click on? Is the information accurate? Is the source trustworthy? Is someone trying to sell me something? If you complete a Google search on “hepatitis C”, there are 30,500,000 results. So where should you go for good information on hepatitis C? Listed below are several hepatitis C websites and examples of the information you’ll find at these sites.

http://www.anthctoday.org/community/hep/index.html – the Liver Disease & Hepatitis Program website. Look here for information about our program. We are in the process of expanding information for patients at this website. So make this a favorite and check back frequently for new information.

Hcvadvocate.org – This site was started by someone with hepatitis C. It is a good source for a wide range of hepatitis C information, including advocacy, personal stories and book reviews.

Liverfoundation.org – This is the American Liver Foundation’s website. This foundation offers support services for persons living with hepatitis C. The American Liver Foundation raises funds for liver advocacy, education and research.

Hivandhepatitis.com – This is a website providers like to use often because it has accurate and very up-to-date information on hepatitis C treatment and ongoing research related to hepatitis. When you go to this website, click on hepatitis C at the top for information related to hepatitis C.

Hepatitis-central.com – This site has information about hepatitis C, blood tests, liver biopsy, and liver cancer. You can also listen to podcasts on some topics. Please note, there are advertisements for products on the side of this website, so be careful about what you are opening.

Caring4hepatitis.com – Good basic information on hepatitis C and other types of viral hepatitis. This website receives funding from pharmaceutical companies.

cdc.gov/hepatitis/c/ – An official government website for hepatitis C information.

So, read up on hepatitis C. Use the internet to help you gather information and to guide questions you have for your healthcare providers. If you aren’t sure about something you read on the internet, print it out or write down the website that you are using and talk to a provider about the information at your next appointment. Happy surfing!
Before You Take That Over-the-Counter Medication

Joshua Crowe, PharmD, Pharmacy Resident and John McGilvray, PharmD

We sometimes think of over-the-counter drugs as not being harmful, but remember that all drugs have side effects. For example, liver injury can be caused by the use of a number of drugs including some that you get over-the-counter. Liver injury may also be caused by alcohol use and some herbal medications and dietary supplements.

Did you know that the common pain reliever, acetaminophen (sold as Tylenol and/or found in some cold medicines) can cause liver injury? This is true if an overdose of acetaminophen is taken or if acetaminophen is taken with alcohol. However, acetaminophen is safe in a person with hepatitis C whose liver is working well. Other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen (sold as Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (sold as Aleve) are generally quite safe to take when taken at recommended doses but in persons with cirrhosis, these medications should be avoided.

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The absolute most important thing for getting through hepatitis C treatment is to have a person that will help support you in daily activities. During treatment I lost all motivation and could barely get off the couch, so chores like cooking, cleaning, shopping and other errands felt nearly impossible. I tried having my mom stay with me for a while but that created more problems so she left. I was taking care of 3 kids at home, going to school, and going to outpatient treatment. I had to make sure the family ate well and since I did not have much help with meals we ended up eating a lot of cereal, sandwiches, prepared meals, fruit, and salad.

If you have someone to help you at home, they need to know how hard it is for you to do things even if you look OK. I may have looked OK but I had no motivation for anything. I had fatigue and joint pain. I noticed mental changes from the treatment medication. I had trouble remembering things, and I was often so depressed I didn’t want to do anything. I sometimes found it hard to even have a conversation. I felt that I was not making sense, especially the 2nd and 3rd months, but this did improve after the 3rd month. I took medication for the depression. My provider also made sure I had appointments with a mental health specialist along with my other doctor appointments, which I was so grateful for because I did need to talk about what was happening throughout this ordeal. It even made my situation feel that I still had control over something. Sometimes I felt like there was no hope and I wanted to do nothing, but I knew it would be over eventually and that helped me get through it. It also helped me to pull myself together and make myself do things. I had daughters I could call and they were very supportive.

If you have liver disease, before you take herbal medications, herbal products or dietary supplements, check with your healthcare provider or pharmacist to see if it will be safe for you. Also, be sure to keep a list of the over-the-counter products that you take along with your prescription medications.

Patient’s Corner: Getting Through Hepatitis C Treatment - Sharon’s Story
as told to Julia Plotnik, RN

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I am so happy that I did this treatment since I know it will help prolong my life. And it’s not just for me, but for my kids and grandchildren too. The whole entire staff of the liver clinic is very sympathetic and are there to hear you! They know a lot and wanted to help. I am encouraged that there are still decent people willing to go the extra mile, like our troops!

If you would like to share your story about living with hepatitis C or hepatitis C treatment, please call Julia Plotnik, RN, at 729-1581.
Nearly 1,300 Alaska Native and American Indian persons with hepatitis C are participating in a long-term research study conducted by the Liver Disease & Hepatitis Program. This study started in 1995 and has looked at many factors that affect persons with hepatitis C. The main goal for this research project is to improve care for persons with hepatitis C.

- All persons have signed written consent for the study, which is approved by the Alaska Area Institutional Research Board (IRB). The IRB, and Alaska Native Tribal Boards such as Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and Southcentral Foundation must approve all research done on the Alaska Native Medical Center campus. Information about persons who take part in this study is kept confidential, which means that participation in the study does not appear in the medical record and no identifying information such as name, birth date, or place of residence appears in any publication or report about the study.
- The Liver Disease & Hepatitis Program has had several partners for much of this research, including the University of Washington, University of Colorado, Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, and the Arctic Investigations Program of the Centers for Disease Control in Anchorage.
- All persons in this study, as well as persons with hepatitis C who have elected not to take part in the study, are treated according to national guidelines from the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases. These guidelines are updated on a regular basis, most recently in 2011.
- The Liver Disease & Hepatitis Program and its research partners have published 16 articles in medical journals since 2004 and a 17th has recently been accepted for publication.

Here are some of the recent findings about hepatitis C from this study:

- Many persons with hepatitis C get a liver biopsy to determine how much, if any scarring is present in the liver. We looked at over 250 persons who had liver biopsies and found that persons with diabetes and those with fat in the liver were **more likely to have a lot of scarring**. In addition, persons who had hepatitis C for many years were more likely to have a lot of scarring than those who got it only a few years ago.
- Persons with hepatitis C who develop cirrhosis (severe scarring of the liver) are **at high risk for getting liver cancer**. We have seen over 40 cases of liver cancer in our hepatitis C patients. This cancer is not only difficult to diagnose when it is in the early stage but it is also difficult to treat. In persons with hepatitis C, especially those with cirrhosis, we regularly draw a blood test called “AFP” to screen for liver cancer. Our study looked at 541 persons who had an AFP drawn over a period of 6 years and found that no one with a consistently normal AFP developed liver cancer. Those with a consistently elevated AFP were more likely to get cancer and also were more likely to have severe scarring of the liver. Because of this finding, we recommend a liver ultrasound every 6 months in persons with hepatitis C who have cirrhosis or elevated AFP.
- **It usually takes many years before hepatitis C causes cirrhosis.** We followed 960 persons for an average of nearly 20 years and found that nearly 1 in 9 persons developed severe liver disease and 1 in 20 died from their liver disease. Only about 20 to 25% of persons with hepatitis C get rid of it on their own, without treatment. We found that heavy drinkers (5 drinks per day or more) who got rid of hepatitis C on their own were just as likely to get severe liver disease or die from liver disease as those who still had hepatitis C. This means that **heavy alcohol use is especially risky in persons with hepatitis C.**