17 August 2015: And a few more pills for good measure

August 17, 2015 By David Pieper

A funny thing happened to me on the way to treat my hep C; I changed genotype. Since 2002 when I was first diagnosed, I have been genotype 1b. I am 1b on the letters sent to me from my various clinicians and on blood test results from labs in two countries. My partner was also genotype 1b both times I transmitted the virus to him. I have been asked the genotype question so many times and always been so sure of my answer. But according to my pre-treatment blood test I am now genotype 1a. I wondered if I might have had both genotypes 1a and 1b, and my last treatment only cleared only one of them. However, it turns out I have a "mixed population". Well, I am all for diversity, but I was feeling just a bit special because I thought I had the less common 1b, which would have also been easier to treat.

The real downside of being 1a, apart from it being common, is that I now need to take five tabs of ribavirin a day in addition to the four other pills in the combo I am taking. The number of pills is not really an issue for me as I've been taking a handful of pills for my HIV every day for the past 19 years; it is now part of my daily routine. But ribavirin is something I would prefer not to take. The most commonly known side effect is "riba rage" (although in the past it was difficult to separate the side effects of interferon from ribavirin as they were always taken together).

My first dose went without a hitch. Every day's pills are on a different row in the convenient blister pack, so it is a cinch to keep track of where you are up to. There is even an image of the sun for the morning pills and the moon for the evening pills, which makes it fool proof. But after the first dose I felt nothing; no interferon injection fever, no nausea, nothing at all. I guess I had wanted to feel something so I'd know it is working, but I didn't feel anything at all for the first two days.

By the evening of day three I was feeling tired. I went to bed early but I couldn't sleep - tiredness and insomnia at the same time. Now that feels like there is something going on in my body. I am also feeling a bit itchy. I know that one, that's the ribavirin; and last time I was on treatment it nearly drove me crazy. But I know how to manage it: cooler showers, take antihistamines, moisturise frequently and try to keep my mind occupied. I also know they can reduce the dosage if it becomes too much. And I am happy with possibly being over-treated, rather than being under-treated and risking not clearing.

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