When Hepatitis C Treatment is Over

May 21, 2013 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

I am officially done with my third round of hepatitis C treatment. However, what I know from more than fifteen years of working with hepatitis C patients, as well as from personal experience, is that the process is not over. First, I have some healing to do, and second I have some waiting to do.

No one can predict how long it will take to return to “normal” after taking antiviral drugs. I advise patients not to count on feeling good immediately. It takes time, and sometimes it feels like two-steps forward, one-step back.

Recovery from hepatitis C treatment may be complicated by which side effects you have, how healthy you were to begin with, and how committed to healthy habits you are. For instance, an overweight smoker who doesn’t exercise might not ever feel right, where someone who says, “I did this and now I am going to stay healthy and exercise and keep my weight down” may do well. Then there are those sad stories of people who did everything by the book but can’t seem to feel good.

Some people feel better in a month, some in a year, and sadly, some say they still don’t feel right; most seem to fall somewhere in the middle. Quite a few say that when they did start to feel well, they felt better than they had prior to treatment.

For most, but not all, lab results begin to normalize in about a month; it may take much longer before the thyroid stabilizes. Just because your labs are normal doesn’t mean you will feel normal, and vice versa. It can be reassuring to have normal results but simultaneously frustrating not to have a visible explanation for why you feel lousy. Never let a lab or your medical provider tell you how you should be feeling.

The sense of taste returns in about a month. Hair growth returns at its usual rate. The length of time it takes for the skin to heal can take months. Chronic aches seem to linger more than just about any other side effect. Baby Boomers who are in their 50’s or 60’s may not recover as easily, especially after long bouts of being sedentary. Older adults have a very small margin of time before their muscles atrophy, bones lose calcium, and damage sets in.

I expect my recovery will be quick and straightforward since I was in an interferon-free clinical trial. I stayed active the entire 12 weeks. The part of my post-treatment experience that will be identical to my previous treatment is that I must wait 24 weeks to know if I am cured. Until then, I am acting as if I am cured.

Regardless of the results, I already know I am a winner. I jumped into the deep waters of hepatitis C treatment. I have proved I am a champion.

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