

Dr. Andrew Weil's Self Healing

Issue: April, 1998

Natural Help for Hepatitis

By Dr. Andrew Weil

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Last year a friend of mine, Susan Piver, came to me with a quandary. She had recently been diagnosed with chronic hepatitis C, a serious, incurable viral infection of the liver, which she had contracted years before from a blood transfusion after a car accident. Susan, a New York City record producer, had sought two opinions from gastroenterologists, both of whom recommended a conventional treatment regimen that seemed grim: months of taking interferon, a drug with major flu-like side effects and a response rate of only 20-30 percent. Susan was reluctant to follow this route and wondered if I knew of any alternatives.

I advised Susan to make some specific nutritional and lifestyle changes and also referred her to a practitioner of Chinese medicine in her area who I had heard was achieving impressive results in treating hepatitis with herbal remedies. "He checked my pulse and gave me a couple of bags of dirt," Susan reported after her first visit. She poured the "dirt" - actually a carefully formulated mixture of Chinese herbs - into gelcaps and took them faithfully, checking in with the practitioner every couple of weeks.

Three months into this regime, Susan had her liver-enzyme levels tested, and they were normal for the first time in 12 years (her raised enzyme levels had been ignored all that time by her former physician). I was happy to hear that, six months later, in January, her retest remained normal. That is an extremely encouraging sign, and Susan plans to stick with her treatment program for the foreseeable future.

Some four million Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The virus was discovered in 1989 (it used to be called non-A, non-B hepatitis), and is now the most common of all serious contagious diseases. Spread through blood-to-blood contact (via intravenous needles; sharing of personal items such as manicure tools, razors, or toothbrushes; even tattooing and body piercing) as well as

through sex, hepatitis C rarely presents any symptoms, and many have no idea how they got infected. Some 85 percent of cases go on to be chronic, but most of those infected are silent carriers.

Within two decades, however, some 20 percent of chronically infected people show symptoms of cirrhosis, or scarring of the liver, and a small percentage go on to develop liver cancer. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine yet for HCV, whose complications cause some 8,000 - 10,000 deaths a year - and may soon, according to experts, take more lives than AIDS.

A "Shadow Epidemic"

The media have recently labeled hepatitis C a "shadow epidemic," emphasizing its scariest aspects. But it is important to remember that the liver - the largest organ in the body and one of the most active - has a remarkable ability to repair itself given the chance, and that the majority of those with chronic HCV do not go on to have complications from the disease. In addition, while mainstream drug treatment for HCV leaves a lot to be desired, there are alternative approaches that can help boost immunity, normalize liver function, and keep the virus at bay, especially if it is detected early.

Treating Hepatitis C Naturally

Below are some steps that I recommended to Susan Piver - and would advise for anyone with hepatitis C (including those taking interferon). Because hepatitis C can have major complications, I recommend that anyone with this form of the virus work with a medical practitioner who can keep an eye on the liver function through periodic testing. While Susan consulted me about hepatitis C, note that these approaches may also be helpful in treating hepatitis B, another serious viral infection that can also become chronic.

Change your lifestyle:

Eat a very-low-protein, low-fat diet. Digesting protein puts an inordinate workload on the liver, so I recommend greatly limiting your intake of concentrated protein foods, such as meat, fish, and dairy products. (Avoid taking protein and amino-acid supplements for the same reason.) One 4-oz. serving of tofu will give you all the protein you need for the day. Eat plenty of starches, vegetables, and fruits.

Take my standard antioxidant formula. You can help your immune system fight the hepatitis C virus by taking the supplemental formula I recommend to all my patients: 1,000 - 2,000 mg vitamin C and 25,000 IU mixed carotenoids at breakfast; 400 - 800 IU vitamin E and 200 mcg selenium at lunch; and 1,000 -2,000 mg vitamin C at dinner.

Strictly avoid all alcohol and tobacco. Alcohol is toxic to the liver and can accelerate liver disease, while smoking takes a major toll on the immune system.

Try to avoid all drugs, whether prescribed, over-the-counter, or illegal. Most drugs are metabolized by the liver. Even common painkillers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), when combined with alcohol, have been shown in studies to cause severe liver damage. If you're taking prescription drugs, ask your doctor whether you truly need to stay on them.

Drink plenty of water. Flushing your kidneys with lots of good-quality water (6-8 glasses a day) will allow your body's purification system to do its job and take some of the workload of detoxification off of the liver.

Take frequent steam baths or saunas. Sweating helps the body eliminate toxins and also reduces the liver's workload. Be sure to replace lost fluids by drinking plenty of pure water at the same time.

Get plenty of rest. Give your immune system an edge by cutting down on unnecessary expenditures of energy, while maintaining a gentle exercise regime.

Avoid exposure to chemical fumes and vapors (such as gasoline and solvents) as well as pesticides and herbicides. The liver bears most of the burden of metabolizing and detoxifying unwanted substances that enter the body. Toxins of any kind weaken immunity and make the body more susceptible to infections and disease.

Try Chinese medicine:

I steered my friend Susan Piver to a practitioner of Chinese medicine for a number of reasons: Doctors in China have a great deal of experience treating hepatitis with traditional medicine (one third of the world's hepatitis carriers are in China), and Chinese studies show that their herbal regime has a much higher sustained response rate than the Western drug interferon, is more affordable, and has no serious

side effects. Some of the herbs used by Chinese-medicine practitioners to treat hepatitis - such as extracts of schizandra and olive leaf - are also suitable for self-treatment.

Because hepatitis is such a complex disease, I suggest seeking out a practitioner of Chinese medicine who is also a medical doctor. I am greatly interested in integrated Chinese medicine, a form that has developed recently in China in which M.D.s are trying to match traditional Chinese treatments to Western pathophysiology.

To locate a Chinese-medicine practitioner in your area, contact the American Foundation of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 505 Beach St., San Francisco CA 94133; (415) 776-0502; or the Institute for Traditional Medicine, 2017 S.E. Hawthorne, Portland OR 97214 (no phone calls, please; Web site: www.europa.com/~itm).

To obtain a paper on treating hepatitis C and B with Chinese medicine, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Quing Cai Zhang, M.D., 420 Lexington Ave. Suite 631, New York NY 10017. (Dr. Zhang, the practitioner I recommended to Susan Piver, has done extensive research on hepatitis.)

Take liver-protective herbs:

There are several herbs that promote liver health and that I would recommend to anyone with hepatitis C or other forms of hepatitis. Use them one at a time for a two-month trial period to see if liver function improves. After that, it is OK to take them in combination.

Milk thistle. European research shows that extracts of the seeds of milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) stimulate regeneration of liver cells and protect them from toxic injury. You'll find this product in most health-food stores. The brand I prefer is Thistlyn by Nature's Way: Take one capsule three times a day until liver function returns to normal.

Schizandra. The dried berries of this Chinese medicinal plant (*Schisandra chinensis*) look like red peppercorns and have a fruity, peppery taste. Chinese studies suggest that schizandra reverses hepatitis B and promotes healing of the liver in general. The easiest way to take schizandra is in capsule form, which you can find in health-food stores (use according to package directions).

Maitake. This mushroom (*Grifola frondosa*), which grows wild in Japan and in some parts of this country, has been shown in Japanese research to have significant antiviral and immune-enhancing properties, and I would recommend it to anyone with chronic hepatitis. If you wish, you can find the whole mushroom in some specialty markets and eat it fresh or dried two to three times a week. I myself prefer to take maitake d-fraction extract (sold in health-food stores) in a liquid form; use according to package directions.

Olive-leaf extract. Recent research from China suggests that this nontoxic herb helps lower the virus load in cases of hepatitis C. It is sold in health-food stores in tablet form; follow package instructions.

Practice precautions, to protect yourself and others:

Get vaccinated against hepatitis A. According to a recent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, people with HCV have a dramatically higher risk of dying if they eat food infected with hepatitis A.

Practice safe sex. This is especially important if you have multiple partners.

Do not donate blood, organs, tissues, or semen.

Inform all medical workers that you have a disease. Hepatitis C can be transmitted to your health-care provider through an accidental needle puncture.

One final note: As with any kind of self-care, your treatment of hepatitis C will have a greater chance of success if you are also working with a physician who is open to alternatives. Susan Piver, for one, switched doctors in favor of one whom she could "rely on for expertise, but would take on more of a co-managing perspective." In her case, the results have been quite positive: The last time we spoke, Susan said she was feeling great, adding, "I don't think of myself as someone with hepatitis anymore."

Should You Be Immunized? - Dr. Weil's Recommendations.

While there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, there are immunizations available for two other common strains of the virus, hepatitis A and B. Here are my recommendations:

Hepatitis A, the most common prevalent form of hepatitis, is often spread via contaminated food or water, and it is a common ailment of international travelers. Many infected adults develop flulike symptoms and jaundice, while children often show no symptoms. Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A does not become chronic: Infected people usually recover after four to eight weeks, even without treatment. However, the same self-care measures used for hepatitis C can support the liver as it heals.

Who should be vaccinated? If you're traveling to underdeveloped countries, call the Centers for Disease Control's International Traveler's Hotline (404) 639-2572 for guidelines. I also recommend the vaccine to people with hepatitis C, IV drug users, people with blood-clotting factors such as hemophilia, and sexually active gay men. The vaccine - administered in two shots 6 months apart - is far superior to passive immunity afforded by gamma globulin, the old method of prevention.

Hepatitis B, which is transmitted primarily by blood products and sexual intercourse, infects some 300,000 people in the United States each year. In recent years, there has been a rising incidence among teens and young adults. Some infected persons show symptoms such as those for hepatitis A, but many are silent carriers. About 5-10 percent of adults who contract hepatitis B become chronically infected. I would recommend that people diagnosed with hepatitis B use the same natural treatments as for hepatitis C.

Who should be vaccinated? I agree with the Centers for Disease Control's recommendation that all children and adolescents receive the hepatitis B vaccine before they become sexually active. Adults should consider the vaccine if they live with an infected person, use IV drugs, are on kidney dialysis, are health workers exposed to blood, are sexually active gay men, or plan to travel to southern China, southeast Asia, or Africa.