



Canada's source for  
HIV and hepatitis C  
information

La source canadienne  
de renseignements sur  
le VIH et l'hépatite C

From *Hepatitis C: An In-Depth Guide*

## Stress (emotional strain or tension)

For some people, stress (emotional strain or tension) can be more disabling than the physical effects of an illness. Stress can also make the symptoms of hepatitis C worse and may even affect the progression of the disease.

A person's life situation, even without Hep C infection, may be stressful. Taking care of the basics will likely take priority over symptom management or the threat of poor health in the future. Worry about where to sleep at night or when the next meal will come is more real for some people than concerns about liver damage, whether they have symptoms or not.

Physical symptoms of stress include lower back and neck pain, headaches, nervous tics, irregular heartbeat or racing pulse, having the feeling of a lump in the throat, sweating, dry throat and mouth, stomach pain and sleeplessness.

### Cause

You can create stress for yourself when you worry about the future. Having Hep C can certainly change your outlook on life. Often stress is caused by worry over events that may or may not happen in the future, but that you believe to be outside your control. For some people, stress comes from having to deal with the losses caused by a chronic illness. People living with Hep C may have several stressors in common.

- Fear of physical and mental deterioration.
- Fear of tests, such as a liver biopsy, and then the worry while waiting for test results.
- Concern that important healthcare services may not be available when needed.
- Uncertainty about the future and feeling unable to make plans.
- Worry about transmitting the virus to others.
- Tension that has developed in important relationships.
- Fear that others will pass judgment and treat you differently because of their attitude about Hep C.

### Treatment

- **Exercise:** Many people find that exercise allows them time to think things through because there are fewer distractions or interruptions. Exercise will also help your body relax by reducing stress hormones.
- **Learn a new calming technique:** Breathing exercises combined with flexibility exercises like yoga can have a calming effect. Research on an approach called [mindfulness-based stress reduction](#) is showing very good outcomes.

### Tips

- ✓ **Plan ahead:** Make a short list of tasks for the next day, then tick them off as you complete them. Try not to get sidetracked by less important obligations that don't have deadlines attached to them. You can plan ahead for both the short term, such as allowing enough time for you to travel from A to B, and the long term, such as completing a disability pension application.
- ✓ **Be aware of interactions with people in your life:** Sometimes your stress will be linked to specific people, so you will need to figure out how to communicate better with them. For example, do you have to be clearer in stating your point of view? More willing to compromise? On the other hand, talking with a trusted friend, even if you don't come up with a solution, will likely make you feel better.
- ✓ **Make time for yourself:** Try spending an hour a day simply relaxing alone without distractions. Also, schedule at least one event during the week so that you can look forward to something. Enjoyable activities will help take your

mind off the stressful things troubling you.

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