

H e p a t i t i s C

Living with
HCV



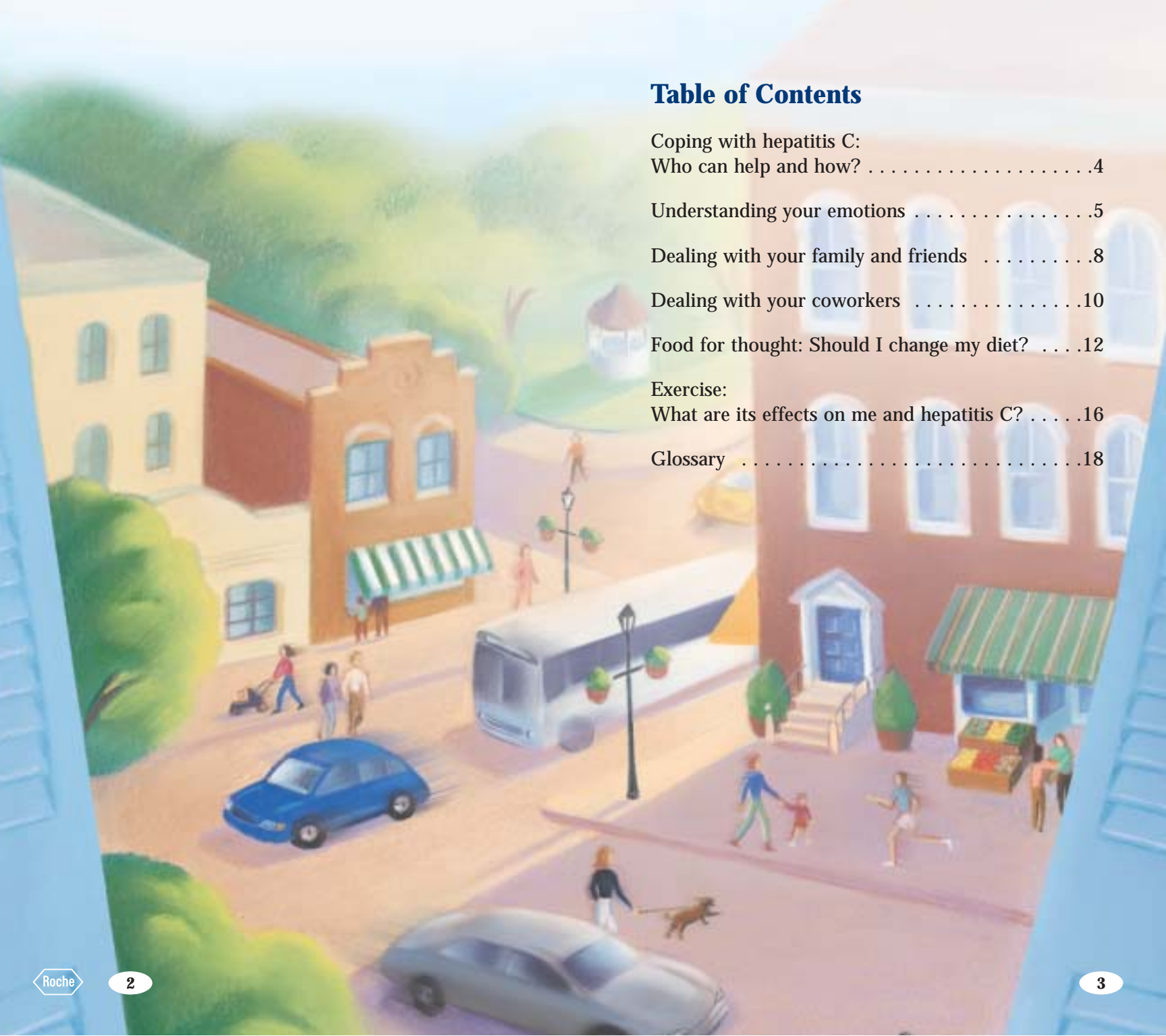


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Coping with hepatitis C: Who can help and how?

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. Because it's often a chronic (or long-lasting) disease, it's important that you learn to *live* with it. **You can make a big difference in how the virus affects your life.** And if you've already talked with your doctor about treating hepatitis C with medication, then you've taken a positive step toward fighting back against the virus.

This booklet covers many topics, including how to tell family and friends that you have hepatitis C, how to deal with depression, how to eat right, the importance of exercise, and more.

But remember, your doctor or nurse is your best source of information about your medical condition and its treatment. You should always feel comfortable asking them any questions you may have.

You may also find it helpful to join a support group, where you can speak to other people who have hepatitis C. For information about joining support groups, contact the organizations listed on the back cover of this brochure.

Understanding your emotions

When you were first told you have hepatitis C, you may have felt shocked, scared or even angry. This reaction is completely normal. In fact, many people go through a sort of grieving process when they're told that they have a serious disease.

It's important that you understand that you're bound to experience ups and downs as you learn to live with hepatitis C. You will first need to come to terms with your diagnosis. Once you've accepted that you have hepatitis C, you'll be able to make adjustments in your life to best deal with your symptoms, treatment and other results of your illness. You'll want to decide how to approach family, friends and possibly coworkers about your situation. And you'll want to make sure your lifestyle is a healthy one, by eating right and getting enough exercise (with your doctor's supervision).

Remember—be patient with yourself. Your attitude can have a positive effect on your health.

What should I do if I feel depressed?

Many people with hepatitis C and other illnesses experience times of depression. But, if depression seems to be disrupting your life, or seems to linger, it's important to talk with your doctor.

Many factors can cause or add to feelings of depression. In people who have hepatitis C, depression can be caused by difficulty coping with their diagnosis or their symptoms. Depression can also be the result of the hepatitis C medication a person is taking. And in some people who already feel depressed, a hepatitis C diagnosis or its symptoms or treatment can actually make their feelings of depression worse. Your doctor can provide more information about this.

The following may be symptoms of depression:

- Low energy, fatigue, lack of interest in your usual activities
- Withdrawn and/or irritable behavior
- Changes in sleeping patterns (such as sleeping less or more than usual, waking up a lot, not feeling rested)
- Significant weight loss over a short period of time
- Loss of appetite, food doesn't taste good
- Tearfulness, breaking into tears for no apparent reason
- Thinking and talking about suicide, feeling that life is not worth living
- Feeling helpless, hopeless and that things won't get better
- Reluctance to resume relationship activities after diagnosis or appearance of symptoms (for example, not getting along with your family if you always have before; not resuming sexual relations with your partner after a reasonable length of time; isolating yourself from others)

Dealing with your friends and family

You may find it hard to tell the people in your life that you have hepatitis C. In fact, your biggest concern may be how they'll react.

Your loved ones may not know much about hepatitis C; so you'll probably want to start out by sharing some facts about the disease with them. You'll want them to know about your symptoms, treatment, etc, and how they can protect themselves against the virus. And, if you think there's any chance they've come in contact with your blood, you should encourage them to get tested.

Family and friends can provide you with a wonderful support system. They can give you emotional support when you need it—and they can help you when you're not feeling physically up to doing all of your daily tasks. Those who care about you may be able to pitch in and help with daily activities such as cooking, housework or taking care of your children.

But you must remember to ask for help when you need it. People with hepatitis C often suffer from symptoms others can't see, like tiredness and joint pain. Because you may not *look* sick, your family and friends may not realize you need help. Be sure to explain this to them.

Keep in mind that those closest to you may also struggle with your diagnosis. Give them time to adjust to the news. And, remember, it's always best to be honest about how you're feeling and what you need. Your doctor, nurse, or social worker may be able to help you and your family best cope.



Dealing with your coworkers

You may see the value in telling your friends, family and other loved ones about having hepatitis C, but you may wonder if you should tell your boss or coworkers.

The decision to tell people at work that you have hepatitis C is up to you. If you're struggling with this decision, the first thing you may want to ask yourself is, "How will having hepatitis C affect my job or my coworkers?" For example:

- Is there a chance my coworkers could come in contact with my blood and become infected with hepatitis C?
- Could there be times when I may need to take a sick day to rest?

If you decide to share knowledge of your condition with people in the workplace, it is hoped that they'll be understanding and provide the support you may need in the months to come. But, if your workplace is not understanding, remember that there are federal and state laws that can provide some protection. Your human resources person at work can give you more information about your rights.

Speaking of human resources, if you do decide to let people at work know that you have hepatitis C, human resources or your company's on-site employee health clinic may be the best place to start.

Food for thought: Should I change my diet?

There's no "official" hepatitis C diet because nutritional needs change as the disease progresses. However, *everyone* can benefit from eating healthy foods—including, of course, people with hepatitis C.

What's a healthy diet? It's more than just vegetables, lean meats and fruits. **The best diets are balanced and provide the right combination of carbohydrate, fat and protein.** You also need to be sure to eat enough—even if you're not feeling that hungry. Your doctor may recommend supplements (like vitamins) to help you get the right amount of nutrients.

Remember, it's very important to **check with your doctor before making changes to your diet or taking over-the-counter drugs, supplements or vitamins.** These items may *seem* harmless, but in some cases they can actually damage your liver.

People who have cirrhosis in addition to hepatitis C will have more specific nutritional needs and should talk about their diets with their doctor, nurse or nutritionist.



How can I eat when I feel nauseated?

It's important for people with liver damage to eat on a regular schedule since the liver plays an important role in providing energy. **Here are ways to make eating easier if you're nauseated or not feeling well:**

- Eat more of the foods you like
- Eat a variety of foods
- Eat frequently (at least three meals a day plus snacks)
- Try supplement drinks (after talking with your doctor)



What should I avoid?

Most doctors try not to restrict what a person can eat. The best thing to do is maintain a normal, healthy diet. But if you experience certain symptoms when you eat particular foods, simply try to avoid those foods.

Some doctors and nutritionists say shellfish (which includes oysters, clams, lobster, shrimp and mussels) should be avoided. Raw shellfish sometimes contain a virus that causes a different form of hepatitis, which can be dangerous and even fatal to people with hepatitis C. Thorough cooking of the shellfish usually destroys any non-hepatitis C virus that may be present; you may become ill if you eat contaminated shellfish raw.

Some people with hepatitis C want to eat a more "natural" diet. If you do take herbs or herbal supplements, just remember that they may interact with the medication(s) that you're taking, or may even affect your liver. This is why **it's always important to talk with your doctor before you add or subtract anything from your treatment regimen.**

Also, it's vital that people with hepatitis C do not drink any alcohol.

Exercise: What are its effects on me and hepatitis C?

It's a good idea for *everyone*—including people with hepatitis C—to be in shape. While exercise won't knock the virus out of your body, **there are many benefits that being active can have on you, including**

- Boosting your immune system
- Relieving symptoms of tiredness and depression
- Reducing stress
- Improving the action of your heart and your general circulation
 - Can be especially important if you have circulation problems along with hepatitis C
 - May reduce your chances of developing cardiovascular problems
 - May even improve your chance of responding to medication by providing good blood supply to infected organs (eg, the liver)
- May help to prevent the development of cirrhosis or to slow its progression

If your doctor recommends exercise, the next step is to decide on an activity you'll enjoy. Some people may run or swim, while others may try yoga or walking. It's important to start slowly and gradually increase the length and intensity of your workouts. **No matter what you choose, remember to talk about the exercise program with your doctor before you start.**

You may want to pick several activities you like to do, but remember, don't overdo it. Overly strenuous exercise may actually *hurt* your immune system in some cases. Also, while exercise may help some people with chronic hepatitis C, people in the acute (early) stage of hepatitis C may need to rest a lot and not do anything too physical. **Again, your doctor will help you decide what's right for you.**

Glossary

Blood-borne virus: A virus that circulates in the blood and can be transmitted from one person to another during blood-to-blood contact (eg, through shared needles)

Chronic hepatitis: Persistent inflammation of the liver, which may lead to other liver problems

Cirrhosis [sir-ROE-sis]: A condition where normal liver tissue is replaced with scar tissue

Depression: A state of mind in which there may be problems concentrating, a loss of interest in things you once enjoyed, feelings of guilt or hopelessness or even thoughts about death or suicide

Virus: A tiny infectious agent that causes disease

Hepatitis C information resources

American Liver Foundation

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603
New York, NY 10038
(800) GO-LIVER (465-4837)
(888) 4-HEP-ABC (443-7222)
<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
(888) 4-HEP-CDC (443-7232)
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>

Hepatitis Foundation International

504 Blick Drive
Silver Spring, MD 20904-2901
(800) 891-0707
(301) 622-4200
<http://www.hepfi.org>

Hep C Connection

1177 Grant Street, Suite 200
Denver, CO 80203
(800) 522-HEPC (4372)
(303) 860-0800
<http://www.hepc-connection.org>

HIV and Hepatitis.com

P.O.Box 14288
San Francisco, CA 94114
<http://www.hivandhepatitis.com>

National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project (NATAP)

580 Broadway, Suite 1010
New York, NY 10012
(888) 26-NATAP (62827)
(212) 219-0106
<http://www.natap.org>

National Hepatitis C Coalition, Inc.

P.O. Box 5058
Hemet, CA 92544
National Hepline: (909) 658-4414
<http://www.nationalhepatitis-c.org>

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