

Symptom series: Brain Fog

Chronic hepatitis C (HCV) impacts the healthy functioning of the liver. The liver has more than 500 functions, including the removal of harmful toxins and substances from the blood.

When a liver is compromised by the hepatitis C virus, it can no longer remove those toxins efficiently. Toxins left in the body can negatively affect all of the body's systems, including the brain, which is responsible for cognitive functions (thinking, learning, understanding and remembering) and motor skills.

When researchers looked more closely at the neural pathways in the brains of people with HCV, they noticed poorer cognitive performance. There appeared to be a breakdown affecting the brain's ability to send messages back and forth from the basal ganglia to the prefrontal lobe. The patients studied were also at a higher risk of symptoms of fatigue.



While we don't know the exact contributors to brain fog (note, other HCV symptoms and treatment can both contribute to brain fog) researchers have found distinct differences in the brain scans of people without hepatitis C compared to those who have the virus. It's also been found that symptoms of brain fog appear more often in individuals who have advanced stages of hepatitis C and/or have cirrhosis of the liver.

The good news is that research tells us the symptoms of brain fog in patients who have

successfully cleared HCV with treatment improves over time. Many patients who have cleared the virus remark that it feels as though a cloud was lifted when they obtained a sustained virological response (SVR).

Researchers are constantly looking for additional insight related to HCV brain fog – studies have confirmed that brain fog exists and that factors can increase one's risk for daily complications related to brain fog symptoms – but additional studies are necessary to pinpoint the exact cause and to make treatment recommendations.

Factors Contributing to Brain Fog

Fatigue – Fatigue is one of the most common and most noticeable symptoms of HCV. Patients who are also undergoing interferon or ribavirin therapies can experience insomnia or sleep disturbances. Those sleep disturbances often lead to headaches or moodiness, which can worsen symptoms of brain fog.

Anxiety – Often, those who are diagnosed with hepatitis C experience anxiety about the infection, symptoms, and/or treatment. That anxiety can cause a patient to feel edgy or irritable, which can worsen symptoms of brain fog.

Sadness or Depression – Sadness or depression are common symptoms when someone has been diagnosed with, and/or is undergoing treatment for, hepatitis C. Many HCV treatment regimens can also worsen symptoms of brain fog. While those feelings typically subside soon after treatment ends and an SVR is achieved, it's important you talk to your doctor if you are sad or depressed, because they may be able to prescribe antidepressants or suggest alternative therapies.

Sometimes relief is as simple as changing medication or dosage, or looking at additional therapies and approaches, which may include:

Hydration

Drinking 6-8 glasses of water daily is key to helping your body flush toxins and operate efficiently. Try increasing your water intake or replacing other beverages with a glass of water.



Exercise

Regular, daily exercise naturally increases cognitive ability. Try getting 20-30 minutes of light exercise daily.



Diet

Eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables while avoiding foods that are hard on your digestive system, such as sodium, sugars, and fat, will improve your body's ability to function effectively. Try adding more vegetables, lean meats, chicken and fish, beans, nuts and seeds into your diet.



Stress Reduction

Meditation, mindfulness practices, yoga, deep breathing exercises, and other complementary, holistic therapies all reduce stress and improve mental functioning. Try a couple of those activities, and pick one which is right for you.



Better Sleep Habits

Poor sleep quality, insufficient sleep duration, and sleep disturbances all interfere with brainpower. Try getting 6-8 hours of uninterrupted sleep per night.



As is the case with any new or increased symptom you're experiencing, always contact your doctor or nurse before altering your regimen. Your doctor or nurse will be able to determine the best course of action to help reduce or alleviate your symptoms of brain fog.