Since 2013, Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) treatment has changed significantly with approval of six new agents or fixed drug combinations. These treatments are far better than any previously available, with cure rates of over 90 percent for most people.

“Until recently, available treatments were lengthy, had serious side effects, and didn’t work very well,” says Cyndi Bakir, Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS), Liver Clinic Care Coordinator at the San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS). “In comparison, the new treatments consist of pills only, cause minimal side effects, and have much better cure rates. The length of HCV treatment has decreased to 12 weeks for most people.”

Because of the high cost of these new drugs and the fact that liver damage progresses slowly in many patients, many organizations targeted patients for treatment only after significant scarring of the liver or early cirrhosis had occurred.

In contrast, SFVAHCS researchers contributed to work showing that the optimal time of treatment should be earlier. National guidelines have now evolved to allow treatment in everyone with HCV, and SFVAHCS encourages all patients with HCV to come for treatment. “Curing the Hepatitis C virus stops ongoing damage to liver cells,” says Bakir. “Most people with Hepatitis C don’t have any symptoms. The only way to know if you have it is to request a blood test.”

Veterans enrolled in VA health care at the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC) can call Bakir at (415) 221-4810, ext. 2-4771 and ask to be screened for HCV. Patients at our six VA community clinics (Eureka, Clearlake, Ukiah, Santa Rosa, San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic, and San Bruno), can call their primary care provider there and request a lab test for HCV. For community clinic patients, liver specialists conduct visits from SFVAMC using Video Telehealth through a novel program called SCAN-ECHO that assists local physicians in caring for patients with HCV. Medication and lab tests are available locally at the clinics.

The SFVAHCS Liver Clinic team also includes two Hepatologists, a nurse practitioner, a clinical pharmacist, and a psychologist. They hold clinics on multiple days of the week, including group treatment clinics and drop-in follow-up clinics. The SFVAHCS Infectious Disease Clinic also has a team of specialists that provide specialized care for Veterans with HIV and HCV co-infection, because of complex drug-to-drug interactions that can occur with the combination of HIV and Hep C treatments. The clinics work closely together to determine the optimal HCV treatment regimen for each Veteran.

Nationwide, the VA leads the country in hepatitis screening, testing, treatment, research, and prevention.

The SFVAHCS Liver Clinic team is a significant contributor and consultant for the VA’s National Hepatitis C Resource Center, where national educational products on HCV are developed, including treatment guidelines and clinical tools for providers, and medication handouts for patients. SFVAHCS investigators conduct research in partnership with the University of California, San Francisco, and other VAs around the country, fostering excellence and scientific collaboration among its members.

“Our message to Veterans is, get tested and get treated,” says Bakir. If you haven’t been tested for Hepatitis C, call me and I can arrange for you to be tested. Once you have your lab work done, I can speak with you on the phone and give you a snapshot of your liver health. If you want to come to our Liver Clinic, I can make your appointment. We want to make your access to care as easy as possible.”

For more information about Hepatitis, visit www.hepatitis.va.gov
Ultraviolet Radiation

Harmful Effects
Protecting your skin from harmful effects of the sun is very important in the summer months. Ultraviolet A and B radiation from the sun can cause damage to your skin including painful sunburn, cancer and aging. For those with fair skin, lupus, or those who take antibiotics or antihistamines, the risks are greater.

Protection
To protect yourself from the harmful effects of the sun, wear protective clothing such as hats, long sleeves, pants, or even sun-safe clothing, which is designed to provide even more protection. Also, consider sunblock for Ultraviolet A or sunscreen for Ultraviolet B. To ensure maximum protection, choose a product that will protect against both UVA and UVB.

Hearing Protection

Warmer months mean more opportunities to engage in activities that could result in noise-induced hearing loss. These activities include boating, motorcycling, sporting events, music concerts, or even mowing the lawn. High noise levels can result in Noise Induced Hearing Loss (NIHL) or tinnitus. Those with NIHL have difficulty understanding other people when they talk, especially on the phone or in a noisy room. Tinnitus is a constant ringing, buzzing or roaring sound in one or both ears. The bad news is NIHL and tinnitus can be permanent, but the good news is they are preventable.

As a rule of thumb, if you have to shout to be heard by the person standing next to you or notice your ears are ringing after exposure, your environment is too loud.

Protection
Hearing protection is useful when you cannot avoid noise exposure. The two most popular forms of hearing protection are earplugs and earmuffs. You can use one or both to protect your hearing. Both forms of protection work by decreasing the volume of the noise reaching the sensitive structures in your inner ear.

Outpatient Pharmacy Remodel

If your prescription is not urgent, skip the trip to the pharmacy and avoid the longer waiting time – consider having your prescriptions mailed to you.

★★ Please allow 7 to 10 days for delivery ★★

FOUR EASY WAYS TO ORDER YOUR REFILLS:

- Call 1-800-847-3203
- Order online using MyHealtheVet at: www.myhealth.va.gov
- Mail your prescription refill request forms to:
  SFVAHCS-Pharmacy 119
  4150 Clement St.
  San Francisco, CA 94121
- Place medication refill slips in the drop box in the pharmacy

Summer Health Tips

- Drinking plenty of water
- Avoiding sunburn
- Protecting bare skin with clothing, hats, sunscreen, or sunblocks
- Draining water from inflamed skin before applying an ice pack
- Avoiding over-the-counter medications that contain aspirin or ibuprofen

Outpatient Pharmacy Remodel

Beginning August 2017, the Outpatient Pharmacy will undergo a major renovation. During the construction, pharmacy staff will be operating from a temporary location (on the first floor of Building 200 – across from Medical Practice) which will greatly impact workflow. This will lead to longer than usual wait times for you to pick up your prescriptions. We apologize for any inconvenience.

If your prescription is not urgent, skip the trip to the pharmacy and avoid the longer waiting time – consider having your prescriptions mailed to you.

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