Chicken Soup for the Liver

Diet, supplements can ease HCV treatment side effects

Dear Readers:
Welcome back to “Ask Doc Misha,” where I answer questions about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

Question: My doctor suggested that I go on interferon treatment. However, I have low white blood cell counts, low platelet counts and anemia. What can I do so I can tolerate interferon therapy?

Answer: In my clinic and in many clinics around the U.S., we use a protocol for assisting with pegylated interferon/ribavirin therapy. CAM protocols have had success with alleviating side effects and apparently helping to improve bone marrow suppression related to interferon.

Goals
One goal of Chinese traditional medicine and CAM during interferon treatment is to avoid having to discontinue therapy or reduce dosage due to side effects. Studies document that staying on at least 80 percent of the interferon and ribavirin doses at least 80 percent of the time is crucial to achieving a sustained viral response.

Another goal is to decrease the need for granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF), which is given to treat people with lowered white counts, lowered platelet counts and anemia but is expensive and can have unpleasant side effects.

It is important to understand the issue of pre-existing low white counts and low neutrophils specifically as it pertains to HCV and interferon treatment.

A common interferon side effect is bone marrow suppression, which results in a reduction in neutrophil, a type of white blood cell. Interferon doses required to treat HCV can typically cause a 30 percent to 50 percent drop of absolute neutrophil and overall white blood cell counts during therapy. Neutropenia occurs when the neutrophil counts fall to levels that may be associated with increased risk of bacterial infections and sepsis. In clinical trials of pegylated interferon combined with ribavirin neutropenia was listed as the most common reason for dose reduction (18 percent) and was a reason for early drug discontinuation in 1 percent of patients.

Most HCV studies have excluded people with pre-existing neutropenia. This exclusion criterion has major consequences for specific population groups. For example, neutropenia is more common among blacks, and a larger proportion of blacks are not offered interferon therapy based on this criteria.

Theoretically, neutropenia complications are believed to be substantial, but studies show there is little evidence for clinical harm from neutropenia induced by interferon, particularly in people with HCV with pre-existing low white cell counts.

The association of drug-induced neutropenia and infection has
been shown chiefly in studies of chemotherapy, such as those involving cancer patients undergoing severe immune system and bone marrow suppressive therapy. In people without immune suppression and no other predisposing factors for bacterial infections, it appears that HCV drug-induced neutropenia may not increase the risk for severe bacterial infection.

We attempt to maintain and improve the neutrophil levels using natural therapies and herbs. There are several areas that we focus on in order to improve blood counts prior to as well as during interferon therapy.

We use acupuncture, moxibustion and nutrition to improve white cell/ neutrophil, platelet and red blood cell counts along with liver function and immune response. Chinese herbal medicines may be used safely for improving blood counts in conjunction with interferon/ribavirin therapy when administered by a qualified, licensed acupuncturist and/or herbalist who is familiar with HCV and any contraindications of herbs.

In order to maximize blood counts, Chinese medicine treatment should be started no less than 12 weeks prior to beginning interferon. We prefer to begin six months to one year prior.

**Herbs and supplements**

I will now mention some Chinese herbs as well as nutritional supplements that can make a difference with neutrophil counts and possibly to improve red blood counts. I recommend that any herbal medicine be prescribed by a knowledgeable, certified practitioner in Chinese herbal medicine who understands hepatitis, contraindications of herbs, and interactions between drugs and herbs.

Some herbs that are used in marrow-strengthening herbal formulas are jixueteng and dan shen. The Chinese medicine characteristics of these herbs are that they tonify and vitalize - that is, circulate and regulate - the xue (blood).

The herb jixueteng (pantholobus) is the chief herb we use in our marrow-strengthening formulas to improve blood counts during interferon therapy. It strengthens kidneys and tonifies the xue. Milletol is its main active ingredient. This herb is effective in managing the interferon/ribavirin side effects of aplastic anemia and lowered white cell counts. In China, it is often used in chemotherapy to improve neutrophil counts and to help people maintain their optimum course of treatment. Jixueteng is found in several herbal formulas designed for people with immune disorders as well as HCV. We sometimes give this herb separately in a liquid form or add it to food. Pregnant women should not use jixueteng because it can cause contractions.
In Chinese herbal medicine, dan shen (Salvia miltiorrhiza) invigorates the xue and removes xue stasis. According to Dr. Qing Cai Zhang, dan shen can improve microcirculation and tissue texture in the liver. Dan shen is found in specialized hepatitis herb formulas and is used in China to treat fibrosis, cirrhosis, liver pain, restlessness, irritability, insomnia and stomach pain.

Other herbal medicines, such as tonic herbs dang gui (Angelica sinensis) and dong chong xia cao (Cordyceps), may be cooked into food to help improve energy and blood counts. Often these foods are rice soups (congee) or chicken soups that have vegetables and other herbs as tonics.

Chicken broth is the base of many soups used as tonics in Chinese medicine. Taken plain it serves as a xue tonic. This is particularly helpful to people who have anemia, fatigue, and dryness of the skin. To make homemade broth, simply simmer cut-up chicken parts or leftover chicken bones in 3 quarts of water over low heat, covered, for at least 45 minutes. Boil down uncovered for 15 minutes, strain and serve.

Lyn Patrick, a naturopathic physician and expert in HCV for more than 20 years, recommends using a combination of vitamin E and other antioxidants during interferon therapy to combat the loss of red blood cells due to hemolysis (blood cell breakdown). However, all supplements should be taken under the supervision of a practitioner, nutritionist or medical doctor who understands the issues of using supplements in HCV treatment.

To find an HCV-certified acupuncture practitioner in your area, please visit my Web site, www.docmisha.com, where you can download the full list of HCV-certified practitioners. Another good way to find acupuncture and Chinese herbal practitioners who are nationally certified is to contact the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine at www.nccaom.org. LH

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Dang Gui Chicken

This chicken soup, made with dang gui, is good for keeping the essential substances and organ systems in harmony and tonifies and regulates xue (blood). You can use a special covered Chinese clay pot that resembles an angel food cake or Bundt pan.

Fill a regular three-quart saucepan with water. Roll a two-yard length of cheesecloth lengthwise into a long sausage shape and place as a collar along the rim of the saucepan. (When done, rinse for reuse.) Place the clay cooking pot on top of the cheesecloth ring as the top of a double boiler. Place one medium chicken, cut up into about 10 pieces, in the clay pot. Add 20 grams of the herb dang gui. If you like, add ginger and root vegetables such as carrots, turnips, potatoes, onions and parsnips. Cook over low heat for one to two hours, until the chicken is completely cooked and ample broth has accumulated in the upper pot. Salt to taste. Serves four. Eat one to two servings a week.