Easy as C&E

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Could popping a few vitamins reduce the miserable side effects of the standard therapy for hepatitis C virus (HCV)? The promising results of a recent study could spell good news for those considering taking an interferon/ribavirin combo (marketed together as Rebetron or available generically). Interferon has long been notorious for sparking flu-from-hell symptoms; since Rebetron's approval, HCVers now also face the risk of ribavirin-induced anemia. This condition can not only force a dose reduction that may compromise effectiveness, but "patients often feel short of breath, become weaker and are unable to do their normal workload," notes Edward Piken, MD, research director at South Bay Gastroenterology in Torrance, California.

Theorizing that ribavirin's buildup in red blood cells causes oxidative stress and early cell death, Piken's group studied whether antioxidants might prevent the anemia. They added vitamins C (1,000 milligrams daily) and E (800 international units daily) to Rebetron in 12 previously untreated HCV patients. "We chose these antioxidants because they have essentially no side effects, and many people already take them," Piken says. Throughout the six months of treatment, those on antioxidants had a milder, slower-developing anemia than did the 14 patients in the Rebetron-only control group—which meant that the nutrient takers could do without the ribavirin dose reductions needed by a quarter of the control group. Piken is now participating in a larger study using a more potent form of vitamin E.

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