



Hepatitis C **HCCAP**

Why Am I So Itchy?

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Itching is a common symptom experienced by people with hepatitis. In small surveys, anywhere from 20-50% of people with chronic hepatitis reported itching as a symptom of their disease. The medical term for itching is pruritus, and there are many different causes for this symptom. For some, this symptom is a minor annoyance. However, those with intense itching can experience nervousness, anxiety, irritability, and sleeplessness that disrupt their normal daily activities. I will review some causes of itching among people with chronic hepatitis, and give some tips about what you can do if you are suffering from this vexing problem.

What is an itch?

Special nerve fibers in the skin called C-fibers relay signals from the skin to the spinal cord and brain. C-fibers are responsible for transmitting the sensation of itching, and also carry pain signals. When C-fibers are stimulated, substances called neurotransmitters are released. The release of neurotransmitters can lead to a cascade of reactions that intensify the itch sensation and may cause redness and swelling in the area where the itch is felt. Outside of allergic reactions, the causes of C-fiber stimulation that lead to itching are not well understood. Whatever the process that causes itching, we all know well that itching leads to scratching. However, scratching for someone with chronic pruritus is counterproductive. Scratching tends to intensify the itch sensation beginning an itch-scratch-itch cycle. Intense itching can cause even the

most levelheaded person to scratch until the skin is broken and bleeding. Few symptoms are more maddening than intense itching.

Itching and Chronic Hepatitis

There are a number of reasons why people with chronic hepatitis experience itching. One such cause is the buildup of bile acids. When bile acids are abnormally high, they are deposited in the skin and often cause intense itching. This form of itching is usually generalized, meaning you itch all over rather than in just one or two areas. As a rule of thumb, the higher the bile acid level the more intense the itching sensation.

There are also a number of hepatitis-related skin and systemic diseases that can cause itching. Examples include lichen planus, porphyria cutanea tarda, cryoglobulinemia, thyroiditis, Sjögren's syndrome, and cutaneous sarcoidosis. Each of these disorders can have serious effects on your health, and must be accurately diagnosed and treated.

Although all of the situations mentioned so far can lead to itching, the fact is most people with chronic hepatitis do not have markedly elevated bile acid levels or any of these other conditions. Yet many people still suffer from itching. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but some possibilities include autoimmune activation of C-fibers, and direct or indirect viral effects on the skin.

When you have a chronic illness, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking every physical symptom you experience is related to your disease. There are many common causes of itching that are unrelated to having hepatitis. A list of some of these common causes of itching is shown below. You do not want to overlook these as possible causes of your itching as many of these causes can be easily treated and/or eliminated, hopefully leaving you itch-free.

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| Allergies | to foods, drugs, pets, pollens, etc. |
| Contact dermatitis | reactions to chemicals including those in soaps, detergents, perfumes, cosmetics, personal hygiene products, toothpastes, mouthwashes, etc. |
| Fungal infections | athlete's foot, jock itch, vaginal yeast infections, ringworm, etc. |
| Viral illnesses | measles, chicken pox, fifth disease, herpes; some cold and flu viruses can cause temporary rashes and itching |
| Eczema and psoriasis | particularly troublesome in winter months, and dry climates |
| Others | excessive perspiration (prickly heat), sun sensitivity or sunburns, poison ivy, poison oak, drug reactions, etc. |

Self-Care for Itching

There are a number of simple measures you can take to reduce skin irritation, thereby reducing your susceptibility to itching.

- Use soaps, shampoos, deodorants, and other personal care products that are free of dyes, preservatives, and fragrances. Avoid or minimize the use of perfumes

and cosmetics. If you use cosmetics, use hypoallergenic products.

- When you bathe or shower, keep the water temperature warm instead of hot.
- Consider adding a chemical-free bath oil or oatmeal (such as Aveeno™) to your bath water. Avoid excessive bathing as this dries out the skin.
- When drying yourself after a bath or shower, pat yourself dry instead of rubbing your skin.
- Use a skin moisturizer that is dye and fragrance-free.
- Avoid after-shave lotions, astringents, and other alcohol-containing products that dry out the skin.
- If you are in a dry climate, consider using a humidifier to add moisture to the air.
- Avoid excessive heat and cold. If you are outdoors in cold weather, cover exposed skin.
- Avoid eating and drinking foods that are very hot or excessively spicy. Hot and/or spicy foods can cause blood vessel dilation, which can aggravate itching.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Use laundry detergent that is free of dyes, preservatives, and chemicals. Laundry detergents marketed for infant clothing are often quite mild. Avoid using bleach, fabric softener, or other laundry aids. Running your clothes through an extra rinse cycle will help ensure that all of the detergent has been rinsed out of the fabric.
- Consider limiting the number of synthetic fabrics you wear as they may contain chemicals that can irritate the skin. People who are particularly sensitive may want to avoid permanent press and wrinkle-resistant clothing as they are chemically treated with formaldehyde and/or other potentially irritating chemicals. Fuzzy clothing and clothing made with wool can be very irritating and lead to intense itching. Natural fibers

such as cotton and linen are least irritating to the skin. Avoid dry cleaning because the chemicals used to clean your clothes remain in the fabric.

- Be sure to wash new clothes, towels, and bed linens before use. Washing helps remove chemicals that have been used on fabrics during the manufacturing process.

The above measures are meant to prevent skin irritation that may lead to itching. There are a number of self-help measures you may want to try to soothe itching skin. A few suggestions are listed below.

- A cold compress can reduce localized itching. Applying pressure to the compress may make it more effective.
- Bathing with oatmeal, cornstarch, bicarbonate of soda (baking soda), epsom salts, and mineral or vegetable oils can provide relief from itching.
- Aloe vera, lanolin, cocoa and shea butters, petrolatum, calamine, camphor, menthol, chamomile, peppermint, calendula, clove, tea tree, sage, nettle, witch hazel, and eucalyptus are all used in lotions, creams, and ointments to relieve itching. Be sure any products you use on your skin are free of dyes, preservatives, fragrances, and alcohols. Topical antihistamine lotions are generally not well absorbed through the skin. Most health care providers agree these agents are not useful for itching from systemic diseases such as hepatitis, and may actually cause allergic reactions in some people.
- If you scratch your skin during your sleep, try keeping your fingernails short or wearing cotton gloves to bed to prevent harming yourself.
- The over-the-counter antihistamine diphenhydramine (Benadryl™) is taken by mouth and released into the blood stream. It can provide effective relief from itching, but often causes

drowsiness. Although this side effect may limit your use of this medicine during the day, it can actually be beneficial at night when itching tends to cause problems for people as they are trying to fall asleep. The antihistamine loratadine (Claritin™) is now available over-the-counter and does not cause drowsiness. This drug can be an effective tool to manage generalized itching in settings where drowsiness would be problematic.

Many people have tried relaxation and meditation techniques to ease the severity of the itching sensation and the anxiety and tension it provokes. Music therapy, biofeedback, visualization techniques, chanting, and other methods have all been used. Although there are no clinical studies proving the effectiveness of these methods, many people have found them to be helpful. Distraction can be effective in reducing the degree to which itching bothers you. When your mind is occupied with other tasks, the amount of attention devoted to the itching sensation is reduced. Lack of distraction is believed to be the reason why many people report itching to be most troublesome at night when they are trying to fall asleep.

Prescription Medications for Generalized Itching

Hydroxyzine hydrochloride (Atarax™) is a prescription antihistamine that is sometimes effective at controlling itching when other antihistamines have failed. However, drowsiness is common with this drug. Other prescription antihistamines such as cetirizine (Zyrtec™) and fexofenadine (Allegra™) do not cause drowsiness and may be helpful in treating generalized itching.

Itching associated with an accumulation of bile acids is often treated with prescription bile-binding drugs such as cholestyramine (Questran™), ursodeoxycholic acid

(Actigall™), and colestimide. These drugs act by preventing the absorption of bile acids from the intestine, thus lowering the total amount of bile acids in the body. The effects of these drugs on itching are not immediate; it may take several weeks for a significant effect to be seen. Bile-binding drugs have the potential to interact with other medications. Therefore, discuss how to take these drugs along with your other medications with your health care provider.

When self-care measures and other prescription drugs fail to adequately control itching, many health care providers turn to sedative or antidepressant medications. These drugs are used to interrupt the itch-scratch cycle at the level of the central nervous system rather than trying to interrupt the processes in the skin that lead to the itch sensation. These drugs also help to alleviate the anxiety and stress associated with chronic itching.

Doxepin is an antidepressant that has been shown in animal studies to also have antihistamine effects. It has been helpful for some people with chronic itching. A number of other antidepressants have also been used to alleviate some of the problems associated with chronic itching; however, their efficacy seems to be highly individualized. What works for one person may not work for another. Prescription sedatives and anti-anxiety drugs are used largely to control the psychological effects that people with chronic itching suffer. Again, the efficacy of these drugs varies from one person to another.

If you are dealing with persistent itching, see your health care provider. An accurate diagnosis is important so that appropriate treatment can begin. Generally, start with simple measures. If one approach is not helpful, try another. Although this process

can be frustrating, people who have been through it say finding an approach that relieves chronic itching is worth the effort. I wish you well.