

## **Understanding NICE guidance**

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**Information for people who use NHS services**

# **Peginterferon alfa and ribavirin for the treatment of mild chronic hepatitis C**

*NICE 'technology appraisal guidance' advises on when and how drugs and other treatments should be used in the NHS.*

This leaflet is about when peginterferon alfa and ribavirin should be used to treat people with mild chronic hepatitis C in the NHS in England and Wales. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). If you would like to know what NICE says about using these drugs for people with moderate or severe hepatitis C, you can find this information on our website (at [www.nice.org.uk/TA075](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA075)) or from the NHS Response Line (phone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference N0428). This leaflet is written for people with mild chronic hepatitis C but it may also be useful for their families or carers or anyone with an interest in the condition.

It does not describe hepatitis C or the treatments in detail – a member of your healthcare team should discuss these with you. Some sources of further information and support are on the back page.



## What has NICE said about peginterferon alfa and ribavirin?

Peginterferon alfa and ribavirin are recommended as possible treatments for people with mild chronic hepatitis C if they are suitable for the person and are used in these ways.

- A person who has mild chronic hepatitis C is offered treatment with a combination of peginterferon alfa and ribavirin.
- People who are not able to take ribavirin are offered treatment with peginterferon alfa on its own.
- The person's doctor should discuss with them whether to start treatment immediately, or to wait and only take the drugs if the disease gets worse. This is called 'watchful waiting'. If the person decides to wait the doctor might suggest taking a small sample from the liver (a 'biopsy') to check how bad the disease is. A biopsy might also be needed for other reasons.
- How long the treatment lasts will depend on which drug is used, what dose the person takes, what type of virus the person has, how much of the virus is in their body, and how well the treatment is working.
- If the person has had treatment with peginterferon alfa (with or without ribavirin) but it has not worked after 12 weeks, they should not be offered a second course of treatment.

NICE has not been able to make a recommendation about whether peginterferon alfa is suitable for people who are younger than 18 years old, or who have had a liver transplant, because there is not enough evidence.

## Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver that is caused by the hepatitis C virus. Some people who catch the hepatitis C virus recover quickly, but most people develop a long-lasting infection; this is called chronic hepatitis C. People who have chronic hepatitis C may feel well for many years, but the virus can make them ill and cause damage to their liver later.

## Peginterferon alfa and ribavirin

Peginterferon alfa is a drug used to treat the hepatitis C virus. There are two types: peginterferon alfa-2a and peginterferon alfa-2b. Peginterferon alfa is usually taken with another drug called ribavirin, but can be used on its own for people who can't take ribavirin.

### What does this mean for me?

When NICE recommends a treatment, the NHS must ensure it is available to those people it could help, normally within 3 months of the guidance being issued. So, if you have mild chronic hepatitis C, and your doctor thinks that peginterferon alfa (with or without ribavirin) is the right treatment for you, you should be able to have the treatment on the NHS. Please see [www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance](http://www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance) if you appear to be eligible for the treatment but it is not available.

*These may not be the only possible treatments for hepatitis C. Your healthcare team should talk to you about whether they are suitable for you and about other treatment options available.*

## More information about hepatitis C

The organisations below can provide more information and support for people with hepatitis C. Please note that NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- Mainliners, 020 7378 5480, [www.mainliners.org.uk](http://www.mainliners.org.uk)
- UK Coalition of People Living with HIV and AIDS, 020 7564 2180, [www.ukcoalition.org](http://www.ukcoalition.org)
- The Hepatitis C Trust, 020 7089 6220, [www.hepctrust.org.uk](http://www.hepctrust.org.uk)
- The Haemophilia Society, free helpline: 0800 018 6068 (10am–4pm), [www.haemophilia.org.uk](http://www.haemophilia.org.uk)

NHS Direct online ([www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)) may also be a good starting point for finding out more. Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) may also be able to give you further advice and support.

### About NICE

NICE produces advice (guidance) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider all the research on the disease or treatment, talk to people affected by it, and consider the costs involved. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

*To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see [www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance](http://www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance)*

*This leaflet and other versions of the guidance aimed at healthcare professionals are available at [www.nice.org.uk/TA106](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA106)*

*You can order printed copies of this leaflet from the NHS Response Line (phone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference N1100).*