

## Sexual Transmission of Hepatitis C

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The Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) can harm your liver. HCV becomes chronic (long-term) in up to 80% of people who become infected. This can sometimes lead to long-term liver problems. About 20% of people who are HCV positive will get liver cirrhosis (hardening or scarring of the liver). About 3 to 4 people out of 100 people with chronic HCV will get liver cancer. Experts say that at least four million Americans have chronic HCV. The number of new cases of HCV in the U.S. is going down, though. There are many things people can do to help keep from getting or giving HCV.

### How do you get HCV?

HCV is found in the blood (blood-borne). This means that you can get HCV if your blood touches the blood of someone who is infected with the hepatitis C virus. The virus is more likely to spread if there is blood involved. There are several ways to spread HCV:

- One of the most common ways to give or get HCV is by sharing drug tools or works (like needles, cookers, cottons, water, etc.).
- Needles used for tattooing, body piercing, and acupuncture may also spread HCV, but it is not very likely in a commercial shop when safety precautions are followed carefully.
- Sharing personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, or nail files probably won't spread HCV. But there is still a chance if there is blood on the item – even if you can't see the blood.
- Many people have contracted HCV through blood transfusions or by receiving HCV-infected blood during an operation or procedure. A test has been used since 1992 to make sure donated blood is safe from HCV. The chances of getting HCV through a blood transfusion today is very rare – less than 1 per 2 million transfused units of blood.

### Sex and HCV

Getting HCV by having sex with someone does not happen very often. But we know that it is possible to give or get blood-borne viruses, like HCV, during sex. HCV is not usually found in body fluids like semen or vaginal fluids. If it is there, it is in very small amounts.

If someone is in a long-term relationship with a person who has hepatitis C, there is only a small chance (up to 3% over 20 years) that they could get hepatitis C from their sexual partner. Of course this assumes that neither partner is having sex outside of the relationship.

It may be easier for women to get HCV from men than for men to get HCV from women. It may be easier to get HCV when having sex with a woman who has HCV while she's on her menstrual cycle, or period. This is because HCV is spread through the blood. The most recent (2002) National Institutes of Health (NIH) consensus statement said that people who have sex with more than only one other person should practice safer sex. People in long-term sexual relationships with one person do not have to change how they protect themselves during sex. But they should practice safer sex if one partner is worried about getting HCV.

In other people who have many sexual partners or are in so called "high risk" groups (men who have sex with men, prostitutes, people who have sex with many other people, people at STD clinics, people who practice "rough" sex) the number of people who get hepatitis C is higher.

*Recently, there have been reports of large outbreaks of hepatitis C among men who have sex with men. The higher rates of sexual transmission among men who have sex with men in recent reports is alarming and it means that many more studies are needed to understand why the sexual transmission rates are much higher and what can be done to prevent transmission of hepatitis C.*

If someone is worried about getting hepatitis C, HIV or another sexually transmitted disease (STD) they should always practice safer sex using barrier methods such as condoms. There is not

much information on women who have sex with women getting HCV during sex. Anal sex may be an easier way of getting HCV than vaginal sex. This is because the lining of the rectum is thin, and anal sex can make small tears in the lining of the rectum that allow contact with blood.

There are no known cases of HCV being given through oral sex on a man (fellatio) or a woman (cunnilingus). It is possible that the virus could be given this way, though, if a person has mouth sores, bleeding gums, or a throat infection.

There are no known cases of HCV being spread through kissing, including deep, open mouth, or "French" kissing. It is possible that HCV could be spread this way if one partner has mouth sores, bleeding gums, or any other condition that could allow blood-to-blood contact. This probably does not happen very often.

**People who have sex with many other people should practice safer sex and use latex condoms.**

### **Additional Risks**

Experts believe that HCV (like HIV) is more likely to be spread if one partner has another sexually transmitted disease (STD). This is especially true if the STD causes sores or lesions (for example, herpes or syphilis). You should always get checked by a doctor if you think you may have an STD. It is important to get treatment for curable STDs such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Some studies say that people who have both HCV and HIV are more likely to contract or spread HCV. This may also be true for people with both HCV and hepatitis B virus (HBV). In addition, people with HIV may be more likely to get HCV. This is because their immune systems (the body's defense for fighting off viruses) might be damaged.

### **Safer Sex**

Some people feel safer knowing that they are doing everything they can to not give or get HCV during sex. Practicing safer sex can also help stop the spread of hepatitis A and B, HIV, and other STDs.

**Using condoms is the best way to prevent transmission of HCV and other STDs.**

Latex condoms are the best type of condoms to use to help prevent getting a sexually transmitted disease. Natural skin condoms have small holes that can let viruses through. Polyurethane (rubber) condoms are also a good choice. They are especially good for people who are sensitive or allergic to latex. Internal or "female" condoms (sold under the name "Reality") fit inside the vagina rather than on the penis.

## Learn how to use condoms correctly

When a condom doesn't work it is usually caused by incorrect use. Pinch the tip as the condom is rolled on in order to create an air pocket that will leave room for the semen. Hold onto the bottom of a regular condom or hold an internal condom in place when withdrawing after sex. This will keep the semen from spilling out. You should tie the condom after it has been used to prevent spills. You should also dispose of it properly. Condoms (both regular condoms and internal condoms) should be used only once. Some people choose to use condoms for oral sex on a man. There are other types of protection for oral sex on a woman. These include latex dental dams, sheets of plastic wrap, and latex sheets sold specifically for sex.

## Use only water-based lubricants with latex condoms or barriers

KY jelly and most commercial lubricants sold specifically for sex are water-based. Don't use oil-based lubricants (such as Vaseline, coconut oil, or moisturizing lotion) since these types of lubricants damage the latex and cause the condom or barrier to break. Don't use lubricants or pre-lubricated condoms that contain nonoxynol-9. Nonoxynol-9 may cause irritation and damage to the vagina, rectum, and penis that may actually increase your chances of getting an STD or HCV.

## Cover any cuts or sores with a bandage

Sometimes people use latex or nitrile (plastic) gloves or "finger cots" to protect broken skin on their hands (like a cut or hangnail) during manual sex. This is done so that fluids (like blood or vaginal fluids) cannot get in.

## Take good care of your mouth to help keep from getting HCV during oral sex

Healthy teeth and gums may be the best way to stop the spread of diseases through the mouth. You should not brush or floss your teeth right before or after oral sex or deep kissing. Brushing or flossing your teeth can cause bleeding gums and tiny cuts in the mouth.

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