
a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

HCV Transmission and Prevention

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HCV IS TRANSMITTED BY DIRECT BLOOD-TO-BLOOD CONTACT.

Before 1992, many people contracted HCV through blood or blood product transfusions. In 1992, a reliable blood test to identify HCV antibodies became available. Since then, the blood supply has been effectively screened. Today transfusion-related cases occur in less than one per 2 million transfused units of blood. People who received clotting factors before 1987 and those who have received dialysis should also be tested for HCV.

HCV Transmission

The main transmission routes for hepatitis C include sharing drug paraphernalia for injection drugs (needles, cookers, tourniquets, water etc.). Non-injection drug paraphernalia such as straws and pipes are also a potential source of transmission. Needles used for tattooing, body piercing, and acupuncture may also spread HCV. Sharing personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, or nail files is a less likely but still possible transmission route.

A small percentage of people may contract HCV through unprotected sexual activity, especially when blood is present. Healthcare workers are at risk for HCV infection because needle-stick accidents and unavoidable situations may result in direct contact with blood from an infected individual.

Perinatal transmission from mothers with HCV to their infants before or during birth occurs less than 4-5% of the time; mothers coinfecting with HBV or HIV are more likely to transmit HCV to their babies – whether or not transmission occurs may depend on the presence of high levels of the virus in the mother's blood.

The transmission route for up to 10% of individuals infected with HCV cannot be identified, but because of the stigma of divulging how people may have gotten hepatitis C, many experts believe this number is even lower.

HCV is not transmitted by casual contact such as:

- sneezing
- coughing
- hugging
- sharing eating utensils and drinking glasses.

HCV Prevention

In order to transmit hepatitis C, hepatitis C infected blood must get into the bloodstream. Transmission of hepatitis C can be prevented by following standard blood borne-pathogen protection practices including:

- Do not share needles or any other drug paraphernalia (works – cookers, cotton, ties, water, etc.)

- Do not share any non-injection drug paraphernalia (straws, pipes, etc.)
- Do not share any hygiene items such as razors, toothbrushes, clippers, nail files, or any items that contain blood.
- Make sure that instruments used for tattooing, body piercing, and acupuncture are properly sterilized—only use new needles, tattoo ink, and piercing jewelry.
- All cuts and wounds should be covered.
- Sexual transmission appears to be uncommon in people who are in stable monogamous relationships. Among people in so-called “high risk” groups (men who have sex with men, sex workers, people with multiple sex partners, people with sexually transmitted disease) sexual transmission appears to be higher and the use of safer sex practices is recommended. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), if you are in a stable monogamous long term heterosexual relationship you do not need to change your current sexual practices, although partners should discuss safer sex options if either partner is concerned about transmission.
- If the woman has HCV, avoid sex during monthly periods.
- Proper dental hygiene can prevent bleeding gums, another possible transmission route.
- Healthcare workers should observe standard universal precautions when dealing with blood.

Notify your doctor, dentist, and other healthcare professionals if you have HCV. If you are a woman with HCV, talk to your doctor if you are thinking about becoming pregnant.

Be Sure to Check Out other Factsheets in This Series:

HCV Transmission and Prevention

- HCV Transmission and Prevention Overview
- Frequently Asked Questions about Sexual Transmission
- How Long Does HCV Live on Surfaces?
- Mother-to-Child Transmission of Hepatitis C
- Occupational Exposure to Hepatitis C
- Preventing HCV and Transmission in Personal Care Settings
- Sexual Transmission of HCV
- HCV and Tattoos

For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit www.hcvadvocate.org.

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