

# HCV

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW



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## What is HCV?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). The liver is a very important organ in the body. It helps digest food, stores nutrients and vitamins, and cleans the blood of wastes and poisons. The hepatitis C virus causes the formation of tiny scars that prevent the liver from doing its job. You need your liver to live.

## What are the symptom of Hepatitis C?

Many people do not have any symptoms. If symptoms do appear, it can be between 2 weeks to 6 months after being infected. At this time some people report fever, lack of energy, loss of appetite, nausea (upset stomach), vomiting and jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin).

Most people who get HCV (75-85%) will have the virus for the rest of their lives (chronic infection) and can spread the virus to others. You can live with Hepatitis C for many years.

However, over the long-term, (sometimes 20 years or more) some people will develop symptoms, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure or liver cancer. Hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplants.

## How do you get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is mainly spread by direct contact with the blood of an infected person. Today, the people at highest risk of getting Hepatitis C are injection drug users. Sharing contaminated needles, syringes, filters, cookers and other drug-using equipment can spread the virus. If you inject drugs you should never share your 'works'.

It is also possible to get Hepatitis C from sharing coke straws (when sniffing cocaine) and crack pipes. This is because coke can cause a bleeding nose from snorting or bleeding lips or gums from smoking. Even if you can't see blood on the straw or pipe, it doesn't mean there is no danger.

Tattooing and body piercing can also be a risk for Hepatitis C. Make sure all equipment is properly sterilized. Hepatitis C can be spread from sharing tattooing ink. Always use fresh ink and new ink pots.

Very rarely, people can get Hepatitis C from household contact where blood is exchanged, such as sharing toothbrushes and razors.

In the past, many people were infected with HCV by receiving infected blood through the medical blood system. Due to screening of donated blood, the blood system is now considered quite safe.

Hepatitis C is not spread by sneezing, coughing, hugging, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or other casual contact that does not involve blood. It is not spread by food or water.

## **Can I get Hepatitis C from having sex?**

Nobody knows for sure. Hepatitis C is not easily transmitted through sexual activity but it is still possible. Any sexual activity where there is the possibility of bleeding can be risky (rough sex,

anal sex, sex during menstruation and some S&M activities). Remember that even if the risk for Hepatitis C is low, it is important to practice safe sex because you can be at risk for HIV or other infections like gonorrhea, syphilis or chlamydia. If you have another sexually transmitted infection it is easier to get Hepatitis C from sexual activity.

## How do I know if I have Hepatitis C?

Many people who have Hepatitis C do not know they have it. The only way to know is to be tested. Since you may have Hepatitis C and not know it, it is important that you avoid risky activities.

## Should I be tested for Hepatitis C?

If you have ever injected drugs you should test for Hepatitis C. All people who have HIV should be tested for Hepatitis C. Healthcare workers exposed to accidental needle sticks and children born to hepatitis C positive mothers can also become infected. Sexual transmission of hepatitis C can occur, but it is not easily spread in this manner. The risk of sexual transmission

increases if you have had multiple sex partners. It is important to be tested because treatments for Hepatitis C work better before liver damage has occurred. Also, you can learn how to protect your liver from further damage and avoid infecting others.

Testing for the general public is not recommended unless you have engaged in a risky activity or have been exposed to the blood of an infected person.

## **Is there a vaccine?**

No. While vaccines do exist for Hepatitis A and B, there is still no vaccine for Hepatitis C.

All people with Hepatitis C should be vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B.

## **Is there a cure?**

Treatment for Hepatitis C is available and can be effective for some people. It is treated using a combination of drugs that can have serious

side-effects. If successful, the virus can be reduced to undetectable levels. However, the treatment is not effective for everyone. There are different types (genotypes) of Hepatitis C and each one responds differently to treatment. Genotype 1, the most common in North America, is the most difficult to treat.

Even if your Hepatitis C treatment is successful, it is possible to become re-infected if you are exposed to the virus again.

## How do I avoid getting Hepatitis C?

If you use drugs, try to avoid injecting. Most drugs that are injected can also be smoked or snorted (but remember not to share pipes or coke straws). If you do inject, then use a new needle and syringe every time.

***If a new needle and syringe are not available, then cleaning the old ones is better than doing nothing.***

1. Fill the syringe with water (soapy if possible), shake, and then squirt out.
2. Fill the syringe with full-strength bleach, leave for at least 30 seconds, and then squirt out.
3. Repeat step 2, using new bleach.
4. Fill the syringe with fresh water, shake, and the squirt out.
5. Repeat step 4, using fresh water.
6. You should also clean and rinse mixing equipment each time.

***Cleaning and rinsing does not protect you from Hepatitis C.***

***Tattooing and piercing should only be done using sterilized equipment.***

## What are the risks?

This chart gives you an idea of how risky various activities are for getting HCV. When people use drugs or have sex, they don't usually do just one thing. You need to think about all the things you do when you use drugs or have sex, and how risky they are.

Remember: don't let blood get inside your own or someone else's body. Don't share needles, syringes or any drug equipment.

## High Risk

1. Injection using shared, uncleaned needle and/or syringe and/or mixing equipment injection using shared, cleaned needle and/or mixing equipment. Piercing, electrolysis and acupuncture using unsterilized equipment. Rough sex, unprotected anal sex, sex during menstruation and some sex work.

All of the practices listed in this category present a potential for HCV transmission because they involve an exchange of blood. In addition a number of studies have repeatedly associated the activities with HCV infection. Even when the exact mechanism of transmission is not completely clear, these studies conclude that activities in this category are high risk. The risk of sexual transmission increases if you have had multiple sex partners.

## Low Risk

2. Snorting or smoking cocaine or other drugs using shared straws and shared pipes. Sharing toothbrushes and razors. Accidental needle-stick injuries. Insertive or receptive penile-anal or penile-vaginal intercourse without a condom, receptive insertion of shared sex toys. Performing fellatio or performing cunnilingus (putting mouth and/or tongue inside vagina) without barrier.

All of the practices listed in this category present a potential for HCV transmission because they involve an exchange of blood. There are also some studies to these activities (usually through individual case studies or anecdotal reports, and usually under certain identifiable conditions.)

**\*While evidence for HCV transmission in sexual activity shows the risk is low, the risk of transmission for other diseases including HIV remains high, thus individuals should remember to protect themselves from HIV and other STIs.**

## Negligible Risk

3. Breast-feeding when nipples are cracked or bleeding. Insertive or receptive penile-anal or penile-vaginal intercourse with barrier. Performing fellatio/cunnilingus with barrier, anilingus (putting mouth and/or tongue around or inside someone's anus). digital-anal intercourse fingering (putting fingers inside someone's anus).

The practices listed in this category present a potential for HCV transmission because they may involve an exchange of blood. However, the amounts, conditions and media of exchange are such that the efficiency of HCV transmission appears to be greatly diminished. There are no confirmed reports of infection from these activities.

## No Risk

4. Injection using a new needle and syringe and unshared mixing equipment. Tattooing, piercing, electrolysis and acupuncture using sterilized equipment. Snorting or smoking cocaine or other drugs using new straw and unshared pipes. Breast-feeding (when nipples are healthy). Kissing, solo masturbation, being masturbated by partner (without using the other person's semen/vaginal fluid as lubricant), using unshared sex toys, urination, ejaculation or defecation on unbroken skin, massage, touch, caressing, dirty-talk, body rubbing.

To our knowledge, none of the practices in this category has ever been demonstrated to lead to HCV infection. There is no potential for transmission since one of the basic conditions for viral transmission is present.

## No risk

4. Kissing, solo masturbation, urination, ejaculation or defecation on unbroken skin, and syringe.

To our knowledge, none of the practices in this category has ever been demonstrated to lead to HCV infection. There is no potential for transmission since one of the basic conditions for viral transmission is present.

# Model

ment. Tattooing,  
S&M activities.

significant number of  
the results of such

stuck injury with a used needle.  
without barrier (sucking cock).

a few reports of infection attributed

ng

## High risk

1. Insertive or receptive penile-anal or penile-vaginal intercourse without condom, sharing needles or syringes to inject drugs, receptive insertion of shared sex toys.

All of the practices listed in this category present a potential for HIV transmission because they involve an exchange of body fluids such as semen, vaginal fluid, blood or breast-milk. In addition a significant number of studies have repeatedly associated the activities with HIV infection. Even when the exact mechanism of transmission is not completely clear, the results of such studies conclude that activities in this category are high risk.

## Low risk

2. Performing fellatio without barrier (sucking cock), performing cunnilingus (putting mouth and/or tongue inside vagina) without barrier, insertive or receptive penile-anal or penile-vaginal intercourse with barrier, \*injection of a substance using a needle and syringe which has been cleaned.

All of the practices listed in this category present a potential for HIV transmission because they involve an exchange of body fluids such as semen, vaginal fluid, blood or breast-milk. There are also a few reports of infection attributed to these activities (usually through individual case studies or anecdotal reports, and usually under certain identifiable conditions).

\* Cleaning does not prevent transmission of the Hepatitis C virus.

## Negligible risk

3. Performing fellatio/cunnilingus with barrier, anilingus (putting mouth and/or tongue around or inside someone's anus), digital-anal intercourse (fingering someone's anus).

All of the practices listed in this category present a potential for HIV transmission because they involve an exchange of body fluids such as semen, vaginal fluid, blood or breast-milk. However, the amounts, conditions and media of exchange are such that the efficiency of HIV transmission appears to be greatly diminished. There are no confirmed reports of infection from these activities.

turbation, being masturbated by partner (without using the other person's semen/vaginal fluid as lubricant), using unshared sex toys,  
or defecation on unbroken skin, massage, touch, caressing, dirty-talk, body rubbing, injection of a substance using a new needle

one of the practices in this group has ever been demonstrated to lead to HIV infection. There is no potential for transmission since none of the  
ral transmission is present.

## **I already have Hepatitis C, What should I do?**

A person with hepatitis C should not drink alcohol because it may cause further damage to the liver. Some nonprescription medicines and herbal remedies can hurt your liver. Ask your doctor about all medications you are taking. You should check with your doctor about tests, regular monitoring, and vaccination for other forms of hepatitis such as hepatitis A and B.

You should practice safe sex by using condoms to protect your partner from getting Hepatitis C and also to protect yourself from getting HIV or other STIs (sexually transmitted infections, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes and syphilis). It is important to be tested regularly for STIs and to be treated for them promptly.

## **I already have Hepatitis C, how can I avoid spreading it to others?**

- Never share needles, syringes or other drug-using equipment.
- Do not donate blood or organs.

- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail care devices, or any other personal items that might have your blood on them.
- Although sexual transmission appears to be low, inform your sexual partner that you have hepatitis C and consider using latex condoms and barriers.
- Cover cuts or open sores on your skin.

### **What about Hepatitis C and pregnancy?**

The risk of transmitting Hepatitis C to your baby is very low, (5 out of 100) but your baby should be tested 12-18 months after being born.

If you have Hepatitis C, breastfeeding is considered safe for your baby but it is recommended you stop breastfeeding if your nipples become cracked or are bleeding.

## What if I have HIV and Hepatitis C?

If you have HIV, Hepatitis C can become serious faster. This is because your immune system may not be strong enough to fight both diseases. Also, some HIV medications can be stressful for the liver. Hepatitis C has become the most common reason for hospitalization and death for those with HIV.

## Other things to think about?

- Using drugs or alcohol can affect your ability to make decisions.
- Before injecting drugs make sure you have plenty of new syringes ready.
- Cleaning a syringe takes a long time. Don't rush even if you are 'Jones'ing (having an intense craving).
- If you shoot drugs, make sure you prepare your shot on a clean surface. Mark your syringes with a pen, or by biting the plunger, or with a burn mark so you can identify them and make sure no one else uses them.

## Who can you call for more information?

- Refer to HIV and HCV Transmission: Guidelines for Assessing Risk (2004), available from the Canadian Public Health Association (**[www.cpha.ca](http://www.cpha.ca)**) Canadian HIV/AIDS Information Centre (**[www.aidssida.cpha.ca](http://www.aidssida.cpha.ca)**). Call toll-free **1(877) 999-7740** or email **[aidssida@cpha.ca](mailto:aidssida@cpha.ca)**
- Contact your local AIDS service organization in your community. This number should be in your phone book.

## Needle cleaning

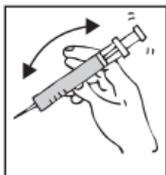
It is well established that sharing needles and syringes poses a high risk of transmission of HIV, HCV and other blood-borne viruses. To avoid the risk, a new and/or unshared needle and syringe should be used every time. Try not to share needles ("fits"). If you do share, always clean the needle and syringe with bleach and water. Here's how.

### Water rinse x1

Fill the syringe completely with sterile water. (Soapy water if you can.) Shake. Squirt out. Do not reuse this water.



**FILL**



**SHAKE**



**EMPTY**

**DISCARD WATER BOTTLE**

### Bleach x2

Fill the syringe completely with full strength bleach. Leave for at least 30 seconds. Shake. Squirt out. Do it again.



**FILL**



**SHAKE**



**EMPTY**

### Water rinse x2

Fill the syringe completely with sterilized water. Shake. Squirt out. (not back into the container). Do it again.



**FILL**



**SHAKE**



**EMPTY**

Clean cooker including spoons with bleach and water. Use a new filter every time. You can get bleach and water from any needle exchange site.

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Ce document est aussi disponible en français.

Canadian AIDS Society  
309 Cooper Street, 4th Floor  
Ottawa (Canada) K2P 0G5  
Tel: (613) 230-3580 / 1-800-499-1986  
Fax: (613) 563-4998  
Email: [CASinfo@cdnaids.ca](mailto:CASinfo@cdnaids.ca)  
Web site: [www.cdnaids.ca](http://www.cdnaids.ca)





Canadian AIDS Society  Société canadienne  
du sida

(613) 230-3580 FAX (613) 563-4998  
Internet: [www.cdnaids.ca](http://www.cdnaids.ca) E-mail/Courriel: [CASinfo@cdnaids.ca](mailto:CASinfo@cdnaids.ca)