

## Sexual Transmission of Hepatitis C

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**T**he Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) can harm your liver. HCV becomes chronic (long-term) in up to 80% of people who get the virus. 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 of people with chronic HCV 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 several things people can do to help keep from getting HCV.

- One of the most common ways to give or get HCV is by sharing drug tools (like needles, cookers, cottons and water).
- Needles used for tattooing, body piercing, and acupuncture may also spread HCV, but it is not very likely, except where safety precautions are not followed carefully.
- Sharing personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, or nail files probably won't spread HCV. But there is still a chance.
- 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, though, to make sure donated blood is safe from HCV. Your chances of getting HCV through a blood transfusion today are less than 1 in 100,000!

### How do you get HCV?

HCV is found in the blood (blood-borne). This means that you can get HCV if your blood or body fluids touch the blood of someone who has the virus. The virus is more likely to spread doing some things than other things. There are several ways to spread HCV:

### Sex and HCV

Getting HCV by having sex 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 – so small that the virus particles may not be able to make you sick.

Most experts believe that 0-3% of straight people who have only had unprotected sex with only one steady sexual partner for a long time get HCV if their partner has HCV. 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 period.

This is because HCV is spread through the blood. The most recent (2002) National Institutes of Health 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. They should practice safer sex, though, if one partner is worried about getting HCV.

Many people in “high risk” groups (gay men, prostitutes, people who have sex with many other people, people at STD clinics) seem to get HCV during sex more often. This is why some experts believe that it is possible to get HCV during sex. But, if it was easy to get HCV during sex, there would probably be more new cases of people getting the virus during sex with their long-term HCV-positive partners.

There is not much information on men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women getting HCV during sex. Many studies show that more gay men or men who have sex with men have HCV. It is not known if they got the virus by having sex, though. Anal sex may be an easier way of getting HCV than straight 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.

According to the National Institutes of Health, people in long-term sexual relationships with just one person do not need to change how they protect themselves. They should practice safer sex, though, if one partner is worried about getting HCV.

***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 more be 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 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 best to keep from getting a 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 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 damage latex and can cause a 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 try not to 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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