

# Is Hepatitis C a Sexually Transmitted Disease?



The hepatitis C virus can be sexually transmitted, but the risk is low. Some studies in which it was claimed that HCV was sexually transmitted are known to be flawed because the group tested (mostly prostitutes) also had other risk factors, such as lifestyle risks (sharing of razors, piercing & manicure equipment, toothbrushes, and generally unsterile environment) and, most notably, intravenous drug use.

According to Health Canada, however, "The risk of infection through sexual intercourse with a carrier is estimated at 2.5% over 20 years. Transmission from mother to child is uncommon, and the question of risk to breast-fed infants of infected mothers is unresolved."<sup>1</sup>

Hepatitis C is spread mainly by blood-to-blood contact. Thus it is conceivable that sharing a toothbrush or a razor—or even deep-kissing after dental flossing—*might* be more risky than actual sex!<sup>1</sup>



**We conclude that heterosexual transmission of hepatitis C is extremely uncommon, despite frequent and unprotected sexual intercourse.<sup>2</sup>**

Other studies suggest that body fluids of patients with chronic hepatitis C are rarely, if ever, contaminated with the hepatitis C virus. This may help to explain the infrequent transmission of this disease by sexual or close physical contact.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

1. Gully & Tepper, "Hepatitis C," *CMAJ* May 15, 1997 (vol 156, no 10): 1427
2. Gordon; Patel, et al. *Am J Gastroenterology* 87: 1849-51 (1992).
3. Fried, Shindo, et al., "Absence of hepatitis C viral RNA from saliva and semen of patients with hep c," *Gastroenterology*. 1992 Apr; 102(4 Pt 1), P 1306-8.
4. Health Canada, "Hepatitis C Prevention and Control: A Public Health Consensus," June 1999, 6.

## How Can I Protect Myself?

### Some Guidelines for Sex & HCV

If someone has Hep C, it might be passed to another person through sex, but possibly only if there is contact with blood and/or lesions. The presence of herpes sores, etc., may make it easier to pass on hepatitis C through sex.

The current recommendations from Health Canada are:

1. **PEOPLE WITH MULTIPLE PARTNERS SHOULD PRACTICE SAFER SEX.**
2. **LONGSTANDING SEXUAL PARTNERS DO NOT NEED TO CHANGE SEXUAL PRACTICES IF ONE OF THEM IS FOUND TO BE INFECTED WITH HEPATITIS C.<sup>4</sup>**

### USE OF BARRIERS

Safer sex principally means using latex condoms or female condoms and lubricant if you have penetrative sex, or having sex without penetration. This is "safer," not safe sex, because there will always be a tiny risk (for example, condoms can break), but the risk can be made so small that it does not interfere with enjoyment of sex. As well as preventing Hep C transmission, safer sex protects against most other sexually transmitted infections (STD's) and AIDS. Some STD's can do serious long-term damage if they are not treated promptly. Safer sex will also help prevent pregnancy.

Extra lubricant should probably be used to help prevent damage to the membranes or to the condom. Don't use a lot, or the condom could come off. Water-based lubricants, such as KY jelly, are safe to use with latex condoms. Oil-

based lubricants, such as Vaseline or massage oils, will damage latex and make the condom unsafe.

Nonoxonyl-9 is a chemical used on some condoms and in spermicidal creams. Some people are allergic to it, so it can cause abrasions, and this increases vulnerability to Hep C. If you experience discomfort with nonoxonyl-9, stop using it. Lubricants such as KY will not cause irritation.

Condoms are sometimes criticised as being unreliable. In fact, condom failure is usually due to incorrect use or not enough lubricant. It is important to follow the instructions carefully. Neither male nor female condoms should ever be reused.

## **ORAL SEX**

It is unknown for Hep C to be passed to someone through oral sex, but it could possibly be passed on if there are cuts or sores in the mouth, bleeding gums, or a throat infection. If menstrual fluid (blood of an hep C infected woman) is also present, there will be more risk of infection. There are no confirmed reports of infection occurring by this route. There is probably not enough Hep C in saliva that is not contaminated with blood to infect another person.

## **OTHER SEXUAL ACTIVITIES**

If sex results in cuts or broken skin, it is good basic hygiene to cover the wound with a water-proof Band-Aid—or better still, to allow it to heal before resuming sexual activity.

Other sexual activities, such as body rubbing, fingering and mutual masturbation will not transmit the virus. French kissing after flossing/brushing or when mouth sores are present is possibly risky, “although deep kissing is not a proven route of transmission and the risk of blood-to-blood contact is extremely low” (*BCCDC*).



**For Further Information,**  
contact your public health nurse or family doctor. Your nearest hepatitis C support group office is:

**On the Net:**  
[info@hepcbc.ca](mailto:info@hepcbc.ca)  
[www.hepcbc.ca](http://www.hepcbc.ca)

*Disclaimer: HepCBC will not be responsible for any damage resulting from the information in this pamphlet. Please consult a physician for medical advice.*

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**OF**

**HEPATITIS C**

