

Is hepatitis C sexually transmitted?

Introduction

Hepatitis C is only transmitted by blood to blood contact.

Transmission rarely occurs during sex, and it is not classified as a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

For most sexual practices blood to blood contact does not occur. If blood is present during sex then barrier protection such as condoms and dental dams are recommended to prevent blood to blood contact.

General hepatitis C transmission information

Hepatitis C is transmitted by blood to blood contact.

This happens when the blood of a person infected with hepatitis C enters the bloodstream of a person who is not infected. For example through:

- Sharing needles, syringes or any other drug injecting equipment.
- Unsterile tattooing or body piercing.

Transmitting hepatitis C during sex

Blood to blood contact must occur for hepatitis C to be transmitted during sex, this could occur:

- When there are cuts, sores, scratches, blisters or lesions on or close to the genitals.
- When the person has a sexually transmitted infection. These can lead to sores and/or broken skin in the genital area.
- During anal sex where the lining of the rectum is easily broken.
- During menstruation if a female partner has hepatitis C.

- Where sexual practices involve piercing or cutting, which leads to broken skin and bleeding.

Although hepatitis C is not classed as an STI rates have been increasing among men who have sex with men, especially in the context of pre-existing human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection. The Australian STI testing guidelines recommend regular hepatitis C testing for HIV positive men who have sex with men.

A small number of studies have found that hepatitis C may be transmitted in sexual body fluids in unique situations. Although rare, this is more likely when the amount of hepatitis C circulating in the blood is high (high viral load), or when the immune system is suppressed (for example when co-infected with HIV).

Sex and relationships

In long-term monogamous relationships research has shown the risk of sexual transmission to be extremely low. Within sexual relationships, where one partner has hepatitis C and where there is little risk of blood to blood contact, it is currently believed that there is no need to change sexual practices.

Protection against hepatitis C by using condoms and dental dams are only recommended if the partner with hepatitis C is menstruating or otherwise bleeding or sexual practices cause bleeding.

Safe sex and sexually transmitted infections

Safe sex is recommended because of the risk of contracting a range of sexually transmitted infections.

These include, but are not limited to:

- Genital herpes
- HIV
- Hepatitis B
- Gonorrhoea,
- Syphilis
- Chlamydia
- Genital warts

Take extra care if you have any condition that involves sores or blisters. The possibility of blood to blood contact and the transmission of blood-borne viruses (including hepatitis C) and STI's increase under these circumstances.

If there is a possibility of blood being present during sex, then it is recommended to practice safer sex by using barrier protection including condoms and dental dams. Don't share sex toys between partners during sex and ensure that they are cleaned before sharing.

These steps can help to prevent the transmission of blood-borne viruses and STI's.

This info sheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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