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

Women and HCV: Transmission

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Hepatitis C (HCV) is the most common blood-borne virus in the United States. Approximately 2% of the population is infected with HCV. Although there are significantly more males than females with HCV, women have unique issues surrounding this disease.

Transfusion Risks

Pregnancy and reproductive organ problems may need emergency blood transfusions. Prior to 1992, some of the blood supply in the U.S. was contaminated with HCV. It is estimated that 250,000 women are infected with HCV because they received blood for Cesarean Sections prior to 1992. The blood supply in the U.S. has been very safe since 1992.

Sexual Risks

The rate of infection due to sexual transmission is believed to be quite low. Women who are in exclusively monogamous relationships with men have about a 0-3% risk. The risk may be higher in the presence of blood, such as during a woman's menstrual cycle. Current recommendations are that people in stable monogamous relationships do not need to change their sexual practices. Safer sex is recommended for those engaged in sex with multiple partners.

The risk increases if a partner has HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, or open sores, cuts, or wounds. Anal sex may have a higher risk, particularly if any tissue is torn. Oral sex appears to be without risk for HCV.

There is not much research on the subject of Lesbians and HCV. There is a general assumption that sex between women carries little or no HCV transmission risk. Over a lifetime, sexual activity between women is 8-20%. However, although this may be true, this assumption may create a barrier between health educators and their female clients. Often, safer sex options are not discussed, thus putting Lesbians and other women at potential risk.

Any partner who wants to practice safer sex for whatever reason is encouraged to do so. Do not let anyone talk you into doing anything you don't feel comfortable about. "No" is a complete sentence. If you are raped or sexually assaulted, ask the trauma team or other medical provider if you should be tested for HCV, along with other diseases. Your HCV risk may be low, but the value of reassurance may be worth it.

For more information, see the HCSP FactSheet, *Sexual Transmission of Hepatitis C*

Occupational Risks

Some predominately-female occupations may present more opportunities for blood-to-blood contact. Some of these are nursing and other healthcare professions; those in the janitorial and housecleaning industries; and those in the cosmetic and personal care industry, such as manicurists, facialists, and so on.

The rate of infection for those in healthcare is close to that of the general population. This is likely due to the strict precautions that healthcare workers follow. For those who work closely with blood: know what the safety guidelines are for your work situation. Following them may keep you and others safe.

The sex worker industry employs a significant number of women. Although sexual transmission of HCV is normally low, transmission risks increase because of a number of factors. First, the risk of HCV sexual transmission increases with multiple partners. Second, sex workers are less likely to practice safer

sex when engaged in sexual activity with someone who is not a client. Third, some women trade sex for drugs. Drugs and all shared drug paraphernalia can be contaminated with HCV or other organisms. The risks are highest if drugs are injectable, although intranasal (snorting) routes are also risky. Fourth, drug use is more likely to lead to unsafe sex. Finally, sex workers are more likely to engage in unprotected sex if there is additional incentive, either financial or drug-related.

The risk of acquiring HCV increases when there are open sores or co-infection with HBV or HIV. Although there is no guaranteed prevention method, the use of barrier protection is advised. Knowing how to correctly use a condom and spermicidal can decrease HCV exposure risks. Sex workers who use injectable drugs are encouraged to learn how to do so safely. Community Needle Exchange and Harm Reduction programs offer education and services that promote safer drug use.

Household Risks

Although there hasn't been a documented case, HCV can theoretically be passed via personal items. Do not share razors, cuticle scissors, nail clippers, toothbrushes or other items that might be exposed to blood. Feminine hygiene products should be discarded properly. Look at the product information insert for proper disposal recommendations on the sanitary product that you use. Most public restrooms have special disposal units for feminine hygiene products. Carry a zip-lock bag with you in case you need to dispose of a product in the trash. You can use this method at home as well.

For more information, see:

- *Women and Hepatitis C: An HCSP Guide*
- *Easy C Facts: HCV and Hygiene Items*
- *Easy C Facts: HCV and Needle Exchange*
- *HCSP Fact Sheet: Occupational Exposure to Hepatitis C*
- *HCSP Fact Sheet: Preventing HCV Transmission in Personal Care Settings*
- *HCSP Fact Sheet: Sexual Transmission of Hepatitis C*
- *Hep C Basics: Sexual Transmission of Hepatitis C*

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

• *hcspFACTsheet* •

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The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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