

Is hepatitis C sexually transmitted?

Hepatitis C transmission rarely occurs during sex, and it is not classified as a sexually transmissible infection (STI).

For most sexual practices blood to blood contact does not occur. If blood is present during sex then 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. This can occur through:

- sharing needles, syringes or any other drug injecting equipment (very high risk)
- unsterile tattooing or body piercing (medium to high risk)
- mother-to-baby during birth (low risk)
- sharing of personal items, such as razors, tooth brushes, nail clippers, nail files and tweezers (very low risk)
- medical and dental procedures in Australia (extremely low risk)
- medical and dental procedures overseas (variable risk)
- blood transfusions prior to 1990 (medium risk)
- blood transfusions after 1990 (extremely low risk).

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.

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 bleeding or sexual practices cause bleeding.

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Safe sex and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

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, and genital warts.

Take extra care if you have any condition that involves sores or blisters especially when these may come into contact with a partner's skin during sexual activity. The possibility of blood-to-blood contact and the transmission of blood-borne viruses (including hepatitis C) and sexually transmitted infections increase under these circumstances.

If there is a possibility of blood being present during sex, then take some simple precautions to practice safer sex. Use condoms for vaginal or anal sex and dental dams for oral sex. Don't share sex toys between partners during sex or ensure that they are cleaned before sharing. These small steps can help to prevent the transmission of blood-borne viruses and sexually transmitted infections.

Useful contacts

Hepatitis C Victoria

Hep C Infoline 1800 703 003
Office telephone: (03) 9380 4644
Email: info@hepcvic.org.au
Web: www.hepcvic.org.au

HIV Sexual Health Connect

Telephone: 1800 038 125
Web: www.connectline.com.au

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

1800 032 017 (Toll free from outside Melbourne metropolitan area only).
580 Swanston Street, Carlton
Telephone: (03) 9347 0244
Web: www.mshc.org.au

HIV / Hepatitis / STI Education and Resource Centre at the Alfred

Telephone: (03) 9076 6993
Email: erc@alfred.org.au
Web: www.hivhepsti.info

Useful Publications

Impact

Women and hepatitis C (booklet)

*Sexually Transmissible Infections
treatment is good/prevention is best*

Department of Human Services booklet.
All these publications are available from
Hepatitis C Victoria.