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2. Hepatitis C: Transmission

Education +
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How is Hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C is a virus that is carried in blood. To become infected with hepatitis C, blood of one person containing the hepatitis C virus must enter the bloodstream of another person.

Hepatitis C virus does not discriminate. It can affect anyone from any age group, no matter who they are.

How is Hepatitis C transmitted?

High risk

- sharing injecting drug equipment (fits, etc)
- having a blood transfusion with infected blood or blood product before 1990 in Australia
- sharing intranasal sniffing implements for drug use
- unsafe tattooing or body piercing procedures
- unsafe health care procedures involving blood, including
- mass immunisation programs with contaminated needles
- medical/dental procedures with contaminated equipment
- acupuncture with contaminated needles

Low risk

- needle stick, sharps or blood accidents in the health care setting
- mother to baby during pregnancy or at birth
- sharing razors, toothbrushes, tweezers, etc

Very low risk (rare)

- unsafe sex practices
- blood transfusion after 1990



How is Hepatitis C NOT transmitted?

Hepatitis C is not transmitted in situations where there is no blood-to-blood transfer, including

- ordinary social contact, such as hugging, kissing, shaking hands
- sharing food or drink, cups or plates or cutlery
- sneezing or coughing
- sharing toilet, shower, bathroom or laundry facilities
- using swimming pools and spas

Hepatitis C is a human disease. It is not transmitted

- to animals or by animals
- by mosquitoes

People with hepatitis C in Australia have contracted the virus through

- **having a blood transfusion with infected blood or blood product**

In Australia, blood banks began testing donated blood for detectable signs of the hepatitis C virus in 1990. The risk of becoming infected through blood transfusion since 1990 in Australia is extremely low.

- **sharing injecting equipment**

Hepatitis C virus can be infectious even in tiny (microscopic) amounts of blood. If you have ever shared drug-injecting equipment, including syringes, needles, tourniquets, swabs, spoons or water, you may have been exposed to infection with hepatitis C. Also, unwashed hands can have blood on them in amounts too small to see and this may transmit hepatitis C.

- **mass immunisation programs with contaminated needles** in some European and Southeast Asian countries after WWII
- **unsafe tattooing or body piercing procedures**

Unsafe practices include reusing needles, dye and dye tubs and not using disposable gloves for each client.

- **needle stick, sharps or blood accidents in the health care setting**

- **unsafe health care procedures involving blood, including medical and dental**

All health care agencies in Australia are now required to use standard infection control procedures to ensure that their patients are not at risk of contracting hepatitis C.

- **Some people cannot pinpoint how they became infected.**



How to avoid transmitting hepatitis C

These are standard infection control or hygiene principles that should be adopted in all households or workplaces whether people have hepatitis C or not.

Be blood aware at home and at work

- Wear disposable gloves when cleaning up blood accidents
- Cover cuts, abrasions or wounds with waterproof dressings
- Health care workers should follow standard infection control procedures
- Don't share personal grooming items, e.g. toothbrushes, razors, tweezers
- Personal items with blood on them go inside 2 plastic bags and then in the rubbish bin
- Health care workers should follow standard infection control procedures, e.g. NHMRC guidelines Infection control in the health care setting
- Wear disposable gloves when you clean up blood accidents. Wipe up the blood with paper towels, and then scrub this area with good quality detergent or bleach and cold water.

Personal hygiene

The risk of transmission between people living in the same household is very low. Infection can only occur when an infected person's blood enters the bloodstream of another person.

- Don't share personal grooming aids such as toothbrushes, razors, tweezers, nail files or nail scissors. These can puncture or cut the skin and carry small amounts of blood.
- Put any personal items with blood on them, (e.g. tampons, sanitary pads, band aids and dressings) inside two plastic bags before putting them in the rubbish bin.

Be blood aware during sex

The risk of passing hepatitis C on during sex is very small.

Consider using condoms, dams or latex gloves if

- blood is present during sex
- there are new or open cuts, sores or abrasions, e.g. from sexually transmissible infections or sexual play
- you are in a new sexual relationship or you are unsure of your partner's sexual health. This is recommended to protect yourself against sexually transmissible infections such as herpes.

The risk of passing on hepatitis C during sex is very small. Hepatitis C is not considered to be a sexually transmissible infection (STI) in Australia. Studies of long-term partners have shown



very little transmission of hepatitis C from one partner to another, so it is usually recommended that long-term partners do not need to change their practices.

What about new partners? Safe sex practices (e.g., using condoms and dams) are recommended for anyone in a new sexual relationship as these protect against sexually transmissible infections such as herpes.

Although the risk of sexual transmission is very small, if blood is present during sex, the risk increases. Couples who are concerned may choose to alter their sexual activities to reduce blood-to-blood contact. Some suggestions are:

- using condoms and dental dams (latex barrier for women's genitals during oral sex) if you are menstruating
- using condoms and lubricant during anal sex

Cuts, sores and abrasions may also allow infection to occur. To reduce blood-to-blood contact, you may choose to:

- use latex gloves during sex with hands or fingers if there are cuts or abrasions on the hands
- if your sexual play involves breaking the skin, make sure that toys or equipment with blood on them are not shared. Vibrators, dildos etc can be covered with a condom that is replaced if sharing between partners.
- Some sexually transmissible infections, such as herpes, cause small sores and lesions. If you or your partner has an STI, consider using condoms or dental dams as protection.

The risk of passing on hepatitis C is increased when a person's Hepatitis C viral load (amount of virus in the blood) is high, for example, during the first 6 months of infection.

There have been recent reports (2008) of sexual transmission of Hepatitis C between men who have sex with men (MSM) who are also HIV positive.

If you are concerned about transmitting hepatitis C during sex, you may wish to speak to your doctor or counsellor.

Mother to baby

There is a low risk of transmitting hepatitis C during pregnancy. Breastfeeding is recommended except when nipples are cracked or bleeding.

It is unusual for a mother to pass on hepatitis C to her baby during pregnancy or at birth. The risk is low, about 5 per cent.

Risk is greater for women with a higher level of virus in the blood. This can happen when women become infected during pregnancy, when they have serious liver disease or when they are also HIV positive.



Transmission of hepatitis C from mother to baby through breastfeeding is very rare. However, medical authorities recommend that mothers with cracked or bleeding nipples should express and discard their breast milk until their nipples are no longer cracked or

bleeding. If you are looking for ways to prevent or treat cracked nipples, speak to your midwife, maternal and child health nurse or lactation consultant. You do not have to tell them you have hepatitis C.

If you want to speak confidentially about breastfeeding and hepatitis C, contact:

- Australian Breastfeeding Association – 24 hour helpline
Ph (03) 9885 0653 – you will be given the name and phone number of a consultant to call
- Maternal and Child Health After Hours Service
Ph 132229

Being blood aware with body piercing

If you are having body piercing, tattooing, electrolysis or acupuncture, make sure the piercing tools or needles used have not been used on anyone else and are sterile.

A body piercing can be a possible transmission route for hepatitis C. After a new piercing on the genitals, sex should be avoided for at least one week after piercing and no body fluids should come in contact with the piercing until it is completely healed. A new body piercing will take at least 4 - 8 weeks to completely heal. After this time, great care should be taken not to injure the piercing as the presence of blood can result in transmission.

'Blood brother' ritual

There is no data on whether this practice is a risk factor for hepatitis C

It is assumed that where there is blood to blood contact, where one person has hepatitis C, that there is a risk to the other person.

Being blood aware when injecting drugs and/or steroids

Don't share needles, syringes or other injecting equipment e.g., spoons, water, when injecting substances like drugs or steroids.

Hepatitis C is transmitted easily through injecting so it is important to be 'blood aware' if you are injecting any substances. Being 'blood aware' helps to prevent transmission to others. It is also important to protect yourself from re-infection with hepatitis C or infection with other blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis B or HIV as these viruses can have a negative impact on your health.

Hepatitis C is found in microscopic (tiny) amounts of blood. In the process of injecting, small amounts of blood can be left in and on used syringes, glasses, water, spoons or filters, tourniquets or fingers. When you inject, you pierce your skin which makes a point for the virus to enter your bloodstream.



Be blood aware by

- Always using new injecting equipment
This is available from needle and syringe programs (NSP). Ring Directline for your closest NSP. Phone 1800 888236
- Not sharing tourniquets, spoons, etc
- Washing your hands before and after injecting or helping someone else inject
Dispose of used syringes in a rigid puncture-proof container such as a sharps container or plastic fruit juice container with a lid. Give the container to an NSP or a hospital.
- Don't assume it is safe to share with someone because you both have hepatitis C. There are many different types of hepatitis C strains or genotypes and it is possible to be infected with a second genotype. You may also be at risk of other contracting other blood borne infections such as HIV, hepatitis B.

Bleaching and then reusing syringes is not guaranteed to protect you from the hepatitis C virus.

Be blood aware in sport

- Leave the field or court if you are bleeding or have blood on you
- Stop the wound bleeding
- Dress the wound
- Clean up the blood
- Use gloves to handle blood or anything with blood on it

Follow the blood rules in sport:

- Players who are bleeding or have blood on their clothes must leave the field or court immediately and seek medical attention
- Before the player can return to the game, the bleeding must be stopped, the wound must be covered with a dressing and the blood cleaned off the player's body and clothes
- Play must not continue until all blood on the ground or equipment is cleaned up

Treat all blood and body fluids as though they are infectious. When there are blood accidents

- Avoid direct contact with blood or body fluids
- Cover any cuts on your body with a protective dressing
- Wear latex gloves to clean up blood

Blood Rules, OK is an Australian government educational booklet or pamphlet for sports associations. For copies, contact: Sports Medicine Australia (02) 6241 9344 or:

http://www.sma.org.au/information/blood_rules.asp

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas/diseases/sti_hsport



A free and confidential service for people seeking information about HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections (STIs)

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Produced by

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