

# Hepatitis C

## Sex and Hepatitis C Virus

Many people with hepatitis C are worried about spreading the virus to their sex partners. This pamphlet talks about how likely it is to spread the hepatitis C virus through sex. If you have hepatitis C, it is not very likely that you will spread the virus through sex. But it is *still* possible. That is why it is very important to talk honestly and openly with your sex partner(s).

### **Can I give hepatitis C to my sex partner?**

Yes, but it is not likely. Compared to hepatitis B virus and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), it is less likely that you will spread the hepatitis C virus to your sex partner.

If you have one long-term sex partner, you do not necessarily need to change your sex habits. But, if either you or your partner is worried about the small chance of spreading the hepatitis C virus, you can use latex condoms. This will make it almost impossible to spread the virus. Long-term partners of people with hepatitis C should get tested for the virus. If the test is negative, you will probably not need to repeat it.

If you have more than one sex partner, you are more likely to spread the virus. In this case, reduce

the number of sex partners you have, practice safer sex, and always use latex condoms.

### **Can I get hepatitis C through other types of sexual contact, such as oral and anal sex?**

We do not know if the virus can be spread by oral or anal sex. There is no proof that anyone has ever spread the virus through oral sex, although it may be possible. Anal sex may damage the lining of the rectum and make it easier to pass the virus through the blood. Using condoms will help prevent spreading the hepatitis C virus and will also protect you against other sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and hepatitis B.

**You *CANNOT* spread the hepatitis C virus through other types of contact, such as hugging or kissing someone on the cheek.**



***I know the hepatitis C virus is in my blood, but is it in my saliva, semen, or vaginal secretions?***

Some studies show that the virus may live in your saliva, semen, or vaginal secretions, but no one knows for sure. We also don't know exactly how much of the virus may live in these bodily fluids or if it can be passed on to a sex partner from these fluids.

***If I have large amounts of virus in my blood, am I more likely to spread the disease to my sex partner(s)?***

Some studies suggest that a lot of the virus in the blood might make it easier to spread the virus. But even with high levels of the virus, you are still not very likely to spread the virus through sex. You do not necessarily have to change your sex habits if you have higher levels of the hepatitis C virus.

***What kind of birth control methods will prevent the spread of the hepatitis C virus?***

If you are worried about the small risk of spreading the virus through sex, you should use latex condoms. Other types of birth control methods, like birth control pills, vasectomy, intrauterine devices (IUDs), or diaphragms do *NOT* decrease the risk of spreading the hepatitis C virus. Latex condoms will also help prevent the spread of hepatitis B, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

***Can my partner get pregnant, and if so, what is the risk that the baby will get hepatitis C?***

It is possible to get pregnant if you or your partner has hepatitis C. If you are a male with hepatitis C, and your female partner does not have hepatitis C (throughout the entire pregnancy), then there is no chance that the baby will contract the virus from the mother. If you are a pregnant female who already has hepatitis C (or gets hepatitis C at some point during the pregnancy), the chance of passing the virus to your baby is low, less than 5 percent. The risk becomes greater if the mother has both hepatitis C and HIV. With proper prenatal care, babies born to hepatitis C-positive mothers or fathers are usually quite healthy.

***I am on combination treatment (ribavirin and interferon). Do I need to use birth control methods?***

**Yes!** Ribavirin can cause severe birth defects, and you or your partner should **NOT** get pregnant while you are taking it. If you are taking ribavirin to treat your hepatitis C, you must use two effective forms of birth control, one for you and one for your partner. For example: the man uses a condom, and the woman uses a diaphragm or birth control pill. You must continue this type of birth control for six months after your last dose of combination treatment.

**What makes me more likely to spread the hepatitis C virus to my sexual partner(s)?**

You may be more likely to spread the virus if you

- do not use latex condoms
- have more than one sex partner
- have had sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) before
- also have another virus such as HIV

**How can I reduce the chances of spreading the hepatitis C virus through sexual contact?**

To reduce this chance, use the following guidelines:

- Have sex with only one person, or not at all.
- Decrease the number of people you have sex with.
- Tell your sex partner(s) that you have hepatitis C and that it is unlikely, but still possible, to spread it to them.



- Use latex condoms correctly and every time, especially if
  - ~ you have more than one sex partner;
  - ~ you have 'rough' sex, which might make one of you bleed;
  - ~ you have sex during your menstrual period or your partner's menstrual period;
  - ~ you have sex when you or your partner has an open sore or cut on either of your genitals.

The risk of spreading hepatitis C to your sex partner(s) is small. If you can talk openly about the disease, and are careful about your sex habits, you can have a safe, healthy sex life.

**Who can I contact for more information?**

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4-HEPCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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