Contents

Hepatitis C 3
Transmission 4
Prevention 6
What happens if you are diagnosed with Hepatitis C? 8
Treatment 10
Contact us 11
Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver. The liver is an important organ; it filters blood from the stomach and intestines so that your body gets the nutrients it needs from food. It breaks down drugs and other chemicals and makes proteins that are important for body functions, such as blood clotting. If Hepatitis C is left undiagnosed and untreated it can damage the liver. It can lead to scarring (fibrosis) or hardening (cirrhosis) of the liver and, in some cases, this can eventually lead to liver cancer.

Hepatitis C often shows no symptoms to suggest a person has been infected.

Over the past ten years, there has been a steep rise in the number of Hepatitis C infections in men who have sex with men (MSM) in London and other big cities in the UK and Europe. So far, the majority of these new infections have been in HIV Positive MSM.

“Hepatitis C often shows no symptoms to suggest a person has been infected.”
Transmission

The most likely means of transmission of Hepatitis C is direct contact with infected blood, even in very small amounts. Until recently, this infection has mainly affected people who inject drugs or people who have had non-sterile injections, operations or blood transfusions. Blood transfusions in the UK have been screened for Hepatitis C since 1991.

The rise in new cases of Hepatitis C in MSM points more toward sexual transmission but whether this is from semen and rectal fluids or small amounts of blood is not clear. There is often an overlap between unprotected sex and recreational drug use. Injecting drugs (‘slamming’) and snorting drugs can also lead to Hepatitis C transmission when equipment is shared, so it is hard to know how many infections are truly sexually transmitted.

Unlike HIV, Hepatitis C can live for much longer periods outside of the body, possibly for several months in the right conditions.
The increase in new infections of Hepatitis C in HIV Positive MSM has led to further debate about other potential routes of transmission. Although the following theories are not yet fully proven, it is important to be aware of them:

- HIV Positive MSM may be more inclined to have unprotected anal intercourse with other HIV Positive men, leading to higher infection rates in this group. Therefore HIV Positive MSM may be more likely to acquire and/or more likely to transmit Hepatitis C.

- Having a high number of sexual partners who also have different sexual partners may increase your risk of coming into contact with, and possibly acquiring, Hepatitis C.

- Certain types of sexual activity may carry a greater risk of blood-to-blood contact, for example, fisting or sharing sex toys.

- Sharing lubrication in group sex settings may pass small amounts of infected blood from one person to many.

- Sharing drug-snorting equipment and bank notes may increase the risk of coming into direct contact with infected blood.

“The most likely means of transmission of Hepatitis C is direct contact with infected blood, even in very small amounts.”
Prevention

As we cannot yet be certain of all the ways in which Hepatitis C can be passed on, it is important to be extra safe in order to help prevent transmission.

The following actions may help to reduce the risk of Hepatitis C transmission:

• Condoms will help to prevent the exchange of potentially infected bodily fluids and substantially reduce the risk of transmission of Hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Make sure the condom is on properly before any genital contact takes place.

• Use individual sachets of lubrication and avoid contact with shared lube.

• Use disposable surgical gloves during fisting and change gloves between partners to reduce the risk of transferring infected blood from one person to another.

Gloves can be purchased from online retailers, large chemists, some sex shops and some sexual health services.

• Use condoms on sex toys and change the condom between partners to reduce the risk of Hepatitis C and STI transmission.

• Clean sex toys after each use. Plastic sex toys should be washed with antibacterial soap and warm water and then soaked in a solution of one part household bleach to nine parts water. They should then be rinsed thoroughly and allowed to dry. Latex, rubber or jelly toys are harder to clean and new condoms should be used each time if you share them.
• Avoid sharing douching equipment. If you attend sex parties, take care not to come into contact with potentially contaminated water in shared wash room facilities as small amounts of contaminated water could carry Hepatitis C.

• Sharing drug-injecting equipment is a proven route of Hepatitis C transmission. If you are injecting or ‘slamming’ drugs, needles should not be used on more than one person. Needles should be disposed of safely in a sharps bin.

• As Hepatitis C can continue to live for long periods outside of the body, injecting drug users should not share any of their equipment including syringes, filters and water.

• If you are snorting drugs, it is safer to use your own snorting equipment. Avoid sharing bullets or bank notes.

• Do not share razors or toothbrushes as this is a proven risk of Hepatitis C transmission.

• Body piercing and tattooing may carry a risk of Hepatitis C transmission if needles, ink and other equipment are used on more than one person.
What happens if you are diagnosed with Hepatitis C?

If you are diagnosed with Hepatitis C you will be referred to a specialist Hepatitis Clinic at the Mortimer Market Centre run by Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL) and the team will look after your Hepatitis C care.

It is important that you consider informing any previous sexual partners so they can also be tested. A health adviser will talk about how best to go about this with you.

**Acute infection**

The first six months of having Hepatitis C is referred to as ‘acute’ infection. During this time a patient might experience symptoms such as jaundice - yellowing of the skin especially noticeable in the whites of the eyes. However, ‘acute’ infection often occurs without any physical symptoms.

During acute infection some patients’ bodies may naturally clear Hepatitis C (around 15-25%). **However, clearing infection does not lead to immunity.** This means that someone who has naturally cleared Hepatitis C, or cleared it by successful treatment, can catch it again.
Chronic infection

If a person has Hepatitis C for more than six months without their body naturally clearing it, the infection is called a ‘chronic’ infection. Chronic infection of Hepatitis C often occurs without any physical symptoms.

Hepatitis C is usually diagnosed by specific blood tests. However, the first indicator of Hepatitis C infection is a change in how the liver is working and this is usually discovered with a liver function test. We regularly test the liver function in our HIV Positive patients, so we can investigate changes immediately.

Being co-infected with HIV and Hepatitis C can make treating both conditions more difficult.

“Major developments are being made in Hepatitis C research and the treatment options we offer are likely to change over time.”
Treatment

Major developments are being made in Hepatitis C research and the treatment options we offer are likely to change over time.

Further blood testing will provide more information about your specific infection. You might need to have an ultrasound, which usually takes place at University College Hospital, and a test called a Fibroscan, at the Mortimer Market Centre.

Starting treatment at the point of ‘acute’ or new infection is recommended if you’re not clearing the virus naturally. If it’s not apparent when you acquired the infection, the Hepatitis Team will talk about your options with you and this may include delaying treatment.

The current treatments for Hepatitis C can have side effects. Your doctor will advise you when they feel that it is best to start treatment and what treatment involves. Side effects are manageable and many people complete current drug treatments without significant problems. If the risks of waiting for new drugs outweigh the risks of the side effects, then you will be offered treatment that is currently available.

You can slow the progression of Hepatitis C by not drinking alcohol.

Taking care of your diet, exercising and avoiding, or at least reducing, recreational drug use may help in maintaining a healthy liver.
Contact us

For more information about Hepatitis C you can speak to a CNWL health adviser at one of the following locations:

Archway Centre for Sexual Health and Contraceptive Care
681-689 Holloway Road
Archway
London
N19 5SE
Tel: 020 3317 5284

Mortimer Market Centre
Capper Street, off Tottenham Court Road
London
WC1E 6JB
Tel: 020 3317 5111

Patient representatives from the Bloomsbury Clinic at the Mortimer Market Centre hold regular HIV/Hepatitis C co-infection support groups. For further information, please contact the patient representatives on 020 3317 5177.

More information about Hepatitis C

The following websites and helplines provide more information about Hepatitis C.

Terrence Higgins Trust (THT)
You can speak to an adviser at THT Direct: 10am to 8pm, Monday - Friday
Tel: 0808 802 1221
Website: www.tht.org.uk

Hepatitis C Trust
Helpline: 0845 234 424
Website: www.hepctrust.org.uk

Hard Cell
Website: www.hardcell.org.uk

Infohep website
Website: www.infohep.org

Freedoms Shop
CNWL’s Freedoms Shop offers excellent prices on many brands of condoms and lubrication and also stocks a range of gloves.
Tel: 020 7685 5977
Website: www.freedoms-shop.nhs.uk
Email: freedoms.shop@nhs.net