



**HEP C AND SEX  
FOR GAY, BI AND  
QUEER MEN**



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This resource is about the sexual transmission of hepatitis C (Hep C) in gay, bi and queer men, including men living with HIV. It will tell you:

- How Hep C is passed on
- How to reduce the risk of passing on Hep C

## WHY LEARNING ABOUT HEP C IS IMPORTANT FOR GAY, BI AND QUEER MEN

In Canada, sharing injection drug use equipment is the most common way that people get Hepatitis C (Hep C). Until recently, sex was not considered to be one of the main ways of passing the virus. However, since 2000, groups of gay, bi and queer men\* in different parts of the world have been getting Hep C through sex. While this has primarily been happening among small groups of HIV-positive gay men who are having sex with other HIV-positive men, some HIV-negative men are also getting Hep C through sexual contact.

Learning about issues affecting our community, such as sexually transmitted Hep C, is part of making healthy decisions for ourselves. Our community of HIV-positive and HIV-negative gay, bi and queer men includes men who may not know their HIV status and those who may be affected by other sexually transmitted infections. Knowing about Hep C helps us all make the best decisions about our health.

\* As far as we know, these reports are from studies that only included cisgender men (non-transgender men), and so most of our knowledge is based on cis men. We discuss the implications for trans men in a later section.

**IN RECENT YEARS,  
GROUPS OF GAY,  
BI AND QUEER MEN—  
ESPECIALLY HIV-POSITIVE  
MEN BUT ALSO  
HIV-NEGATIVE MEN—  
HAVE BECOME HEP C  
POSITIVE THROUGH SEX.**





## WHAT IS HEP C?

**H**epatitis C, or Hep C, is a virus that causes scarring in the liver. The scarring can sometimes be so severe that the liver no longer works properly or stops working altogether, meaning a liver transplant is needed. A small number of people with Hep C can also develop liver cancer.

As many people with Hep C have no symptoms for years, it is possible to live for a long time without being aware of the infection.

About a quarter of people who get Hep C will be able to get rid of (or clear) the virus on their own.

For people who don't clear the virus on their own, there is treatment that is effective for many people at curing Hep C.

A person can get Hep C more than once. Having Hep C in the past and clearing it does not mean that you are protected from getting Hep C again in the future.

## HOW HEP C IS PASSED ON DURING SEX IN GAY, BI AND QUEER MEN

Hep C is passed on when Hep C-positive blood gets into the bloodstream of another person. While Hep C is sometimes found in semen, front hole and vaginal fluids, it is not clear if these fluids play a role in passing on the virus during sex.

The following factors have been linked to passing Hep C during sex among gay, bi and queer cisgender men:

- sex that causes bleeding
- group sex
- sex while using drugs
- HIV and serosorting
- other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

## SEX THAT CAUSES BLEEDING

Hep C has been linked to sex that damages the delicate wet tissues lining the ass and dick. The damage could be too small to see.

This kind of sex includes:

- rough ass fucking
- ass fucking for long periods of time
- rough ass play with a hand (fisting) or toys

Activities like this are considered “rough sex.” They can cause bleeding or leave openings for Hep C to get into the body.

**HEP C PASSES THROUGH BLOOD-TO-BLOOD CONTACT. ROUGH ANAL SEX CAN CAUSE BLEEDING OR LEAVE OPENINGS FOR HEP C TO GET INTO THE BODY.**



While many cases of Hep C infection during sex between men have so far been linked to rough ass play, it makes sense that, generally speaking, if there is blood there might be a risk for Hep C.

The chance of passing Hep C might increase when:

- an ass is bleeding due to tears in the muscle or skin, warts (from HPV), hemorrhoids or ulcers from other STIs
- a bleeding finger or hand is inserted without a glove into someone’s ass, front hole or vagina
- blood is present due to menstruation, a drop in hormones with hormone therapies, or during menopause

## GROUP SEX

Cases of Hep C have been linked to having sex with more than one partner in the same sex session (for example, threesomes or moresomes). During group sex, dicks (flesh dicks or strap-on dicks), hands, fingers or sex toys are sometimes inserted into more than one person, either without a condom or glove or without a new condom or glove for each person. Sharing lube also increases the chance of passing on the virus, as blood carrying Hep C may get into shared lube.

Keep in mind that guys might not be aware of everything happening in a group session. Depending on the scene, a guy may be having sex with only one person, but that person may also be having sex with others and moving back and forth among partners, for example in different rooms in a bathhouse. In situations like this, if sex is condomless or if new condoms or gloves aren’t used for each session by the person going back and forth, the risk of passing Hep C increases.

## SEX WHILE USING DRUGS

Cases of Hep C have also been linked to recreational drug use, including snorting drugs as part of foreplay or sex. It's no secret that drugs can heighten sex in many ways. This includes using poppers or cocaine to make it easier to fuck and fist, or to fuck and fist for a longer period of time. Drinking alcohol or using drugs can also reduce inhibitions, enabling people to make choices they wouldn't usually make and that increase the risk of Hep C passing.



There have also been reports of mucosal damage in the ass involving crystal meth use. The resulting damage can leave a person open to an increased risk for infections like HIV and Hep C.

Numbing creams, which can be used to delay orgasm, can also make rough sex easier. However, they may also decrease one's ability to notice an injury, increasing the risk of Hep C being passed.



Finally, Hep C can also be passed when sharing straws or rolled-up bills for snorting drugs like cocaine or pipes for smoking crystal meth or crack. Shared straws and pipes can have blood on them, even if it isn't visible. Burns and split lips from pipes can also be openings for Hep C to pass through.

## HIV AND SEROSORTING

Serosorting is when someone chooses to have condomless sex with a person of a perceived HIV status. Some men use serosorting in an attempt to reduce the risk of passing or getting HIV during condomless sex. However, serosorting by HIV status doesn't reduce the risk of passing Hep C or other sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis or gonorrhea. On the contrary, some experts think that serosorting may actually increase risks by concentrating infections, such as Hep C, in smaller groups and networks of men.



Many cases of Hep C have been in HIV-positive men who serosort to have condomless sex with other guys with HIV. Researchers are exploring whether Hep C passes more easily between HIV-positive men. They have noticed that co-infection with HIV and Hep C can sometimes lead to higher levels of Hep C virus in the blood compared with someone who has Hep C alone. The Hep C virus has also been found in the semen of co-infected men and vaginal fluids of co-infected women. (Studies have not been done with trans men and trans women yet.) Because HIV attacks the immune system, it is also possible that some HIV-positive men are more susceptible to Hep C infection. Studies continue to better understand this important issue.

## OTHER SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS (STIs)

STIs such as syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia and Hep B have also been found among some people who suspect they got Hep C through sex. Other STIs, such as herpes or LGV, can cause sores or ulcers on the genitals or in the anus (as well as elsewhere on the body), which can provide an opening for Hep C to get into the bloodstream.



## OTHER WAYS HEP C IS PASSED ON

These are other ways Hep C can get into the bloodstream:

- Sharing injection equipment like syringes, filters, cookers, acidifiers, alcohol swabs, tourniquets and water for injecting substances such as heroin/opioids, crystal meth, silicone, hormones or steroids
- Getting a tattoo or a piercing with unsterilized tools or re-used ink or ink pots
- Re-using disposable medical equipment that should only be used by one person
- Getting a blood transfusion or having a medical procedure in countries where screening has not been done for Hep C (in Canada, blood has been screened for Hep C since 1990, but this may not be the case in other countries)



## HEP C AND TRANS MEN WHO ARE GAY, BI OR QUEER

**M**ost of what we know about the sexual transmission of Hep C in gay, bi and queer men has not included trans men. However, gay, bi and queer trans men may have sex, inject hormones or use drugs in the ways we've discussed here and may find this information relevant.

The biology of trans men's bodies may sometimes increase the chance of Hep C passing during sex. For example, if a trans man is taking testosterone, his front hole may be more likely to bleed during frontal sex. This may be a risk for getting or passing Hep C because blood is present.



## HOW TO PREVENT HEP C

Preventing Hep C during sex means not letting blood pass between partners. It also means knowing your Hep C status and taking care of your sexual health.

## MAKE SEX SAFER

Here are some ideas for making penetrative sex safer:

- Use a new condom on dicks (flesh dicks or strap-on dicks) or dildos for penetrating each partner.
- Use a new glove for fisting each partner.
- Use lots of lube when having sex, especially for long sex sessions.
- Have your own lubricant.
- Before play, pour a portion of lube into separate containers for each partner. Use a fresh source of lube that has not been touched by lubed-up hands.
- Check regularly for blood or injuries if you are fucking or fisting, especially if the ability to feel pain is reduced by drugs, alcohol or numbing creams. Often, minor bleeding can cause pinking—small amounts of blood mixed in with lube. Using light-coloured gloves, drying hands with paper towels and having a well-lit area can all help to see pinking.



- A pause in sex is a good idea when pinking is noticed. Bleeding beyond pinking indicates more serious damage and all anal play should stop. Medical attention may be necessary. Note that there is a risk of passing Hep C even if there is no pinking.
- Disinfect sex toys or put a condom on them before using them on a partner. Change the condom with each partner. Some sex toys (particularly leather, wood or damaged rubber or silicone toys) cannot be practically sterilized and should not be shared without a fresh cover (such as a condom) for each partner.
- Talk to your partners about getting tested for Hep C, HIV and other STIs.



Keep in mind, great sex can involve more than fucking, fingering or fisting. Other activities like licking, stroking, role and BDSM play are just a few ideas. They can be the principal play or can be switched to if you notice blood and you want to keep playing. Use your imagination! Our brain is our largest sex organ.

**USE A NEW CONDOM OR GLOVE EACH TIME YOU SWITCH PARTNERS. HAVE YOUR OWN TOYS AND LUBE.**



Oral sex does not seem to be a way to pass on Hep C. However, the presence of blood or open sores and the possibility of Hep C in the semen of co-infected men are good things to keep in mind when considering the chances of passing Hep C. Some guys in this situation choose to use a condom, particularly if they are already living with HIV.

## MAKE DRUG USE SAFER

When using drugs in a group, bring your own drug use equipment.

- If you snort drugs, such as cocaine or ketamine, have your own straw or bumper. Rolled up Post-It Notes make new single-use, disposable straws.
- If you smoke drugs, such as crystal meth or crack, have your own pipe. If you do share a pipe, make sure each person uses their own mouthpiece.
- If you inject drugs such as crystal meth, use new equipment each time, including syringes, filters, cookers, acidifiers, alcohol swabs, tourniquets and water.
- Consider bringing extra new equipment for other people to use and keep.



Many communities offer services that provide new drug use equipment. These services have different names, such as needle and syringe programs or harm reduction programs. Ask a trusted healthcare worker for more information about services in your area. Workers at your local Hep C or HIV community organization or local gay, bi and queer men's health organizations will be able to help you access these services.

## WHEN USING DRUGS IN A GROUP, MAKE SURE EVERYONE **HAS THEIR OWN** EQUIPMENT. CONSIDER BRINGING EXTRA NEW SUPPLIES FOR OTHER PEOPLE.

## TAKE CARE DURING PERSONAL GROOMING

Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or other objects that may have come in contact with another person's blood.



## GET TESTED FOR HEP C

It's a good idea to be tested for Hep C at least once. Talk to a healthcare worker about where you can get tested; many places offer free and confidential testing. If you don't have a health card, don't let this be a barrier for getting tested and taking care of your health—many places offer testing for people who don't have health cards. Talk to a trusted healthcare worker about where you can access these services. Consider adding Hep C to your regular STI testing routine if you:

- have rough anal sex
- have group sex
- have HIV or another STI like syphilis
- share drug use equipment



### TALK TO YOUR HEALTHCARE WORKER ABOUT BEING TESTED FOR HEP C.

You may find that you have to be your own advocate when it comes to asking for testing. Your healthcare worker may not automatically recommend it, but testing is important. Knowing your Hep C status early on means you can get care and treatment sooner and can make informed choices about protecting yourself and others from Hep C.

For most people, testing for Hep C takes two tests:

1. Antibody test — the first test shows if you've been exposed to Hep C.
2. RNA or PCR test — the second test looks for active virus in the body.

It can take up to three months after exposure to Hep C for the first test to produce reliable results, so talk to your healthcare worker about when you should test for Hep C if you think you have been exposed.

Both tests are needed to confirm an active Hep C infection because most people will always test positive on the antibody test once they are exposed to Hep C—even if they have cleared the virus.

It may take longer for guys with HIV to develop Hep C antibodies. They may want to get tested three months after the possible exposure and again at six months. In cases where someone living with HIV has a low CD4 cell count (less than 200), the antibody test result may be incorrect, giving a negative result when the person in fact has Hep C.

Another option for anyone regardless of their HIV status is to have the Hep C RNA test instead of the antibody test. The RNA test can uncover a Hep C infection even before Hep C antibodies develop. Talk to your doctor, nurse or healthcare worker about your options.



## GET TESTED **REGULARLY** FOR OTHER STIs

Testing for and treating STIs helps keep you healthy. Some guys test more frequently than others because of the type of sex they're having and how often they have sex. If you're having condomless anal or oral sex with partners whose status you don't know or with casual partners you may want to consider testing more often for STIs (every 3 to 6 months). Guys who've had condomless sex may also want to consider more frequent testing. Talk to your healthcare worker about what is right for you.



## GET **VACCINATED** FOR HEP A AND B

Hepatitis A and hepatitis B are two other viruses that can damage your liver. There are vaccines available that can protect you from Hep A and B. Consider getting these vaccinations as part of your general healthcare. There is no vaccine to protect against Hep C.

Vaccines for Hep A and Hep B are sometimes available for free for men who have sex with other men. If you received the Hep A and B vaccines when you were a child, you may want to get a blood test to find out if you need a booster shot to maintain immunity.

People with HIV may not develop immunity after receiving the Hep A or B vaccines or may have a shorter period of immunity after a vaccine and may need to be revaccinated. Talk to your healthcare worker for more info about this.



## WHAT WE'RE **STILL** **LEARNING** ABOUT SEX AND HEP C

The information in this resource is based on the latest findings about Hep C transmission at the time of publication. More work is being done to better understand the sexual transmission of Hep C for men who are gay, bi and queer—both trans men and cis men. In particular, we are interested in learning why it seems that people living with HIV appear to be more vulnerable to Hep C infection. Ongoing work is also looking at the risk of Hep C transmission with bodily fluids other than blood, such as semen.

## OUR HISTORY WITH HIV **EQUIPS** US TO MANAGE HEP C

Gay, bi and queer men invented safer sex. In response to HIV, we explored how to use barriers and lube for our own pleasure. We've also had discussions in our own communities to address the stigma associated with accessing HIV prevention, testing and treatment.

A lot of the same strategies are useful in dealing with Hep C. If you are a sexually active gay, bi or queer man, you can prevent Hep C by getting tested for STIs, taking care of your sexual health, talking with your partners and having satisfying sex that reduces the chance of passing Hep C and other infections.





## RESOURCES

**CATIE** carries extensive up-to-date information on Hep C, HIV and co-infection, and it is Canada's ordering centre for related materials. Visit [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca) to learn more.

**ACT** has extensive online information on many topics affecting gay, bi and queer men's health at [www.actoronto.org/gaymen](http://www.actoronto.org/gaymen), [www.actoronto.org/hepc](http://www.actoronto.org/hepc) and at [www.torontovibe.com](http://www.torontovibe.com)

For more resources on gay, bi and queer men's health you can also visit the Gay Men's Sexual Health Alliance at [www.thesexyouwant.ca](http://www.thesexyouwant.ca), the Health Initiative for Men (HiM) at [www.checkhimout.ca](http://www.checkhimout.ca) and RÉZO Santé at [www.rezosante.org](http://www.rezosante.org)



**For more information and resources on HIV or Hepatitis C please contact:**



**AIDS Committee of Toronto**

[www.actoronto.org](http://www.actoronto.org)

416.340.8484



**Canada's source for HIV  
and hepatitis C information**

[www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

1.800.263.1638

**Disclaimer:** Information in this brochure is not medical advice. Decisions about treatment should always be made with the advice of a doctor who knows about HIV or Hep C. Treatment changes, so talk to a doctor to get the latest information. The opinions in this brochure may not be the views of ACT, CATIE, other partners or funders. Information on safer drug use is not meant to promote the use or possession of illegal drugs.

We gratefully acknowledge content review provided by the Gay Men's Sexual Health Alliance (GMSH), the Health Initiative for Men (HiM) and RÉZO Santé.

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**Designer:** Ty Best

**Copy Editor:** RonniLyn Pustil

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**This booklet in print is available across Canada from CATIE.  
In Toronto, the booklet in print is available from ACT.**

CATIE Ordering Centre

Catalogue Number: ATI-30066

(aussi disponible en français, ATI-30067)