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## Is there a connection between HIV and hepatitis C?



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Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada.

Yes. A person who is infected with both the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and the hepatitis C virus (HCV) is considered to be co-infected.

Hepatitis C is a serious liver disease that can inflame and cause scarring of the liver. Eventually, it can lead to liver failure, liver cancer and death.

Among people who are HIV/HCV co-infected, hepatitis C gets worse faster. For example, their liver becomes damaged more rapidly, and their chance of dying from liver disease may be higher. Co-infected mothers are more likely to transmit HCV to their babies during delivery.

More research is needed to determine the effects of HCV infection on the progression of HIV.

More than 11,000 people in Canada are HIV/HCV co-infected, but many of these 11,000 have not been diagnosed.

### How does HIV/HCV co-infection happen?

HCV is transmitted through direct contact with infected blood. HCV is 10-15 times easier to transmit through blood than HIV.

You can get HCV by:

- injecting drugs using syringes, needles, swabs, filters, spoons, tourniquets or water containing infected blood (it is estimated that almost two-thirds of new HCV infections in Canada each year are related to injection drug use)
- snorting cocaine with a contaminated straw
- being tattooed or body pierced with contaminated needles, ink or jewellery
- sharing contaminated razor blades or toothbrushes
- being born to a mother infected with HCV, or
- receiving a blood transfusion, blood product or organ transplant (universal testing of blood donors since May 1990 has substantially reduced this risk).

Sexual transmission of HCV is possible, but not very common. Having unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners increases your risk of becoming infected with HCV.

### **Is there treatment for HIV/HCV co-infection?**

There is no specific treatment for HIV/HCV co-infection—there are only separate treatments for HIV infection and HCV infection. Treating HIV/HCV co-infection is complicated—often people who are HIV/HCV co-infected are coping with many different medical, social and drug-related issues. Recently, new management guidelines have been developed to help doctors in Canada care for people with HIV/HCV co-infection.

### **Can HCV infection be prevented?**

Yes. To avoid becoming infected:

- use only new needles to inject drugs or for tattooing or body piercing—**cleaning with bleach may not kill HCV**
- use clean swabs, filters, spoons, tourniquets and water for injecting
- don't re-use equipment (needles, ink or jewellery) for tattooing or body piercing
- don't share razors or toothbrushes
- wear latex gloves if you may have contact with someone's blood
- practice safer sex (see Question 11 "How can I have sex more safely?").

To avoid infecting others:

- get tested for HCV
- never share needles or other drug injecting equipment.
- don't share razors or toothbrushes
- practice safer sex.

***For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.***

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For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1  
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