



# Hepatitis C and LGBTQ+ Health

## TIPS FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

### WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?



Hepatitis C (hep C) is a serious, but curable liver disease. If left untreated, hep C can be a lifelong infection that can cause serious health problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and even death. There are often no symptoms, so the only way to know if you have it is to get tested. While there is no vaccine to prevent hep C, there are medications that cure people living with hep C in as little as 8 weeks.

### HOW IS HEP C SPREAD?



Hep C spreads when the blood of someone with hep C meets the blood of someone else. Hep C is most commonly spread by sharing syringes and equipment (such as cookers, vials, cottons, water, etc.) used to inject silicone, drugs, hormones or vitamins. Hep C can spread through shared drug snorting or smoking equipment, like straws, bills, and glass pipes. Hep C can also spread through tattooing or piercing equipment at a place other than a licensed shop. Hep C can survive on surfaces and objects for many weeks.

### WHO IS AT RISK FOR GETTING HEP C?



People who are LGBTQ+ are not at any greater risk for hep C than anyone else. Certain activities, that are not done safely, can put someone at a higher risk for infection, regardless of sexual orientation or gender. People living with HIV or who have a weakened immune system have a reduced ability to fight off infections and may be at a higher risk of getting hep C.

### CAN HEP C BE SPREAD THROUGH SEX?



Sexual transmission of hep C is a complicated topic, and we're still learning more about it. Although not common, hep C can spread during sex where blood may be involved, such as condomless sex, fisting, and the use of shared sex toys or equipment like whips or chargers. Having a sexually transmitted infection (STI), having sex with multiple partners, and engaging in anal sex may increase a person's risk for hep C.

## RESOURCES

#### **Materials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

- [Hepatitis C – General Information](#)
- [Hepatitis C – What to Expect When Getting Tested](#)
- [Viral Hepatitis – Information for Gay and Bisexual Men](#)
- [Hepatitis C and Injection Drug Use](#)
- [Testing for hep C during every pregnancy](#)
- [Breast/chest feeding infants when living with hep C](#)
- [Know More Hepatitis – CDC Recommends All Adults Get Tested for Hepatitis C](#)

#### **Materials from Howard Brown Health**

- [Hormone Injection Instructions](#)

#### **Materials from the Washington State Department of Health**

- [Syringe Service Programs in Washington](#)

# CONSIDER THESE TIPS

## to help people better understand and prevent transmission of hep C.

### Get tested for hep C:

- Everyone should get tested for hep C at least once in their lifetime.
- Yearly testing is recommended for people living with HIV, taking HIV PrEP, or who inject substances.
- Knowing their hep C status will allow them to seek treatment and prevent spreading hep C to others.
- Encourage people who test positive for hep C to talk with a doctor, nurse, or health practitioner about treatment options. Hep C can be cured, and treatments are better than ever! Almost everyone living with hep C, including people who are also living with HIV, can be cured in 8 to 12 weeks taking oral medications with no or few side effects. Everyone has the right to be treated and cured.

### Reduce hep C transmission during sex:

- Remind people to be mindful of sexual activities that may involve blood, such as anal sex or fisting, and consider safer sex strategies. Encourage them to wear latex or polyurethane condoms or gloves, and change into new, unused ones for each new partner. If fisting, they should check hands for cuts or bleeding cuticles.
- Encourage people to avoid sharing sex toys or other equipment with multiple people during sex or cover them with condoms, or wash equipment thoroughly before using them on another person.

### Get tested for STIs every 3 to 6 months:

- Sores and warts from STIs, such as syphilis, anal and genital warts, and herpes can be an entry point for hep C. Encourage people who test positive for an STI to get treated and try to give the sore time to heal before resuming sexual activity.

### Reduce hep C transmission during injection:

- Encourage people who inject hormones, silicone, drugs, or vitamins, to avoid sharing supplies and get new equipment from a local syringe service program or pharmacy.

- Encourage those who snort or smoke drugs to avoid sharing straws, bills, or pipes, as small amounts of blood can get on these items.
- Encourage people to only use shops licensed by the Washington State Department of Licensing for tattoos, body piercings, body art, or permanent cosmetics.

### People living with hep C:

- Encourage them to avoid alcohol or cut back on the amount they drink. Drinking alcohol adds to the strain on the liver, increasing the risk of liver damage.
- Remind them to consult a doctor about any medications or herbs they may be taking.
- Encourage them to get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B – having hep C and another type of hepatitis can cause serious health problems.
- People living with hep C should maintain a healthy weight, diet, and regular exercise to protect their overall health.

### Avoid hep C reinfection among people who have had hep C before:

- The best way to prevent reinfection is to avoid contact with blood containing the virus.
- Encourage people who inject substances to not share needles, syringes, or other equipment used to inject drugs, silicone, hormones, or vitamins. Syringe services programs can provide clean needles and equipment.
- Encourage using a condom or other barrier method during sex and to check for sores and warts prior to sex.
- Encourage routine hep C testing. Once infected, someone will always have the antibodies to hep C (the body's response to the virus, sort of like footprints that show the virus was once there). That means a hep C test that looks for the virus itself (called a PCR or RNA test) is needed to confirm current infection for all future testing.