

HEPATITIS C

SILENT KILLER BEHIND HIV



What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). It is transmitted through contaminated blood or blood products and sometimes the sexual route. After infection, the virus attacks the liver, causing acute and very often chronic infection.



What are the effects of HCV infection?

Most people have no symptoms when they first acquire HCV. They may live with it for many years without even knowing they have been infected. For a minority of patients, symptoms may develop in the acute phase, including fever, fatigue, appetite loss, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and even jaundice.

About 80% of infected people would develop **chronic liver infection**. This may ultimately develop into cirrhosis, liver cancer, and death.

How common is Hepatitis C?

In Hong Kong, the estimated HCV prevalence in general population is around 0.3%.

In the last decade, there have been increasing overseas reports of acute HCV infections via sexual transmission in men who have sex with men (MSM), especially those who were HIV positive. Locally, the prevalence of HCV in the HIV infected MSM seen at the Department of Health (DH) was found to be 1.3% for the years 2000-2012, which is 4 times that of the general population. In addition, rising trend of the infection among local HIV infected MSM has been observed in recent years. In 2013, a case series of sexually transmitted HCV infections among HIV infected MSM was found by DH.

How do HIV and HCV affect each other?

A person infected with HIV has a lower level of immunity, making it harder for him to resist HCV. Therefore, co-infection with HIV and HCV can lead to more **severe disease and faster progression of hepatitis**. This seems to be the case even if you have a high CD4 count.

For people with HIV, chronic hepatitis C makes them susceptible to **toxicity from HIV treatment**.

In addition, the presence of HIV infection is thought to **increase the infectiousness of HCV transmitted through sexual contact**.

Who are more likely to get HCV infection?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne disease. People who share equipment for injecting drug use are most at risk, but sexual transmission does occur.

For sexual transmission, **unprotected anal sex, having multiple sexual partners, use of recreational drugs and having sexually transmitted infections** such as syphilis are known to be associated with HCV infection.

How to prevent HCV?

There is no available vaccine for HCV, but there are effective ways to prevent it.

1. Practice safer sex



- Always use a condom and use it properly, use a new condom for each partner;



- Use adequate amount of lube, do not use lube that may be contaminated with blood;



- Avoid taking drugs or drinking alcohol before or during sex;

- Avoid sore and bleeding to both as well as burst condom during sexual intercourse;

- Sex toys like dildos should not be shared. They should be covered with a new condom for each partner. If contaminated by blood, the toys should be cleaned with 1:4 diluted household bleach.

2. **Do not share needle; use disposable needle each time.**



3. **Sharing of personal-care products, including razors, toothbrushes, nail cutters etc. should be avoided.**



4. **For acupuncture, piercing or tattooing, needles and other equipment should be sterile and/or disposable.**

How is HCV infection diagnosed?

Diagnosis can be made by blood test for antibodies to HCV. People co-infected with HIV and HCV may not produce enough antibodies to be

detected, a viral load (PCR) test may be used to confirm the diagnosis.

Regular screening for HCV is recommended for HIV infected people.



How to treat HCV infection?

Treatment for HCV infection is available, but it is quite complex. The treatment success rate in HIV infected patients may also be limited.

If you suspect you might have HCV infection, please consult your doctor as early as possible.



As with most sexually transmitted infections, hepatitis C is most effectively prevented by consistent and correct use of condom. Other sexually transmitted infections, if present, should also be treated as quickly as possible.

For those who are injecting drugs, it is extremely important not to share the use of any injecting equipment with others.

RELATED INFORMATION:

AIDS Hotline: (852) 2780 2211

Gay Men HIV Testing Hotline: (852) 2117 1069

Virtual AIDS Office of Hong Kong: www.aids.gov.hk

Gay Men HIV Information website: www.21171069.com