Hepatitis C Can Be Present Enough in Rectal and Nasal Fluids for Transmission Risk

This finding suggests sex between men and the sharing of drug-sniffing equipment are possible routes of transmission.

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People with hepatitis C virus (HCV) may have viral loads high enough in their nasal or rectal fluids to transmit the virus through sex between men or the sharing of drug-sniffing equipment, such as rolled-up cash, aidsmap reports.

Presenting their findings at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases in San Francisco (The Liver Meeting), researchers conducted a study of 47 people with hepatitis C virus (HCV) that was detectable in their blood. The study included 23 men who have sex with men (MSM), 17 heterosexual men and seven heterosexual women. Forty-two of the study members were coinfected with HIV.

The participants had a median HCV viral load of just over 1 million.

Thirty-two of the study members were acutely infected with HCV, meaning they had been infected very recently.

The investigators took swabs of the participants' rectal and nasal fluids.

Seventy percent of the study members tested positive for HCV in at least one of their rectal or nasal swabs, including 62 percent who tested positive for a nasal swab and 47 percent who tested positive for a rectal sample. Those who tested positive according to either swab had a median HCV viral load of 1.9 million while those who tested negative had a median viral load of 12,000.

Among those who tested positive, the median HCV viral load in nasal samples was 575, compared with 60 in rectal samples. Both of these viral loads would pose a risk of transmission.

The detectability of HCV in the samples was not associated with whether participants had HIV, were recently infected with HCV or how they likely contracted that virus.

Of the 32 individuals who provided information on their risk factors for acquiring or transmitting HCV during the previous six months, 69 percent reported inhaling drugs; almost half of these said they shared drug inhalation equipment. Of the 31 percent who reported injecting drugs, only 6 percent reported sharing injection equipment. Two thirds of the participants who reported on risk factors said they engaged in receptive anal sex; only 6 percent of these reported frequently using condoms.

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