HIV-Negative Gay Men May Acquire Hepatitis C Sexually

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HIV-negative men who have sex with men (MSM) are apparently at risk for sexual acquisition of hepatitis C virus (HCV), the National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project reports. Their risk factors are likely similar to those of HIV-positive men, among whom there is an emerging epidemic of sexually transmitted hep C.

Researchers at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London conducted a retrospective study of the clinic's patients in which they identified 44 acute cases of hep C among HIV-negative MSM between January 2010 and December 2013. Thirty-four percent of the men spontaneously cleared the virus, 25 percent began treatment for hep C, 30 percent remained in care and 11 percent were lost to follow-up. Then men's ages ranged between 24 and 75, and the groups had a median age of 37.

Eighty-two percent of the 44 men reported both insertive and receptive anal intercourse without a condom, while 9 percent reported just receptive intercourse without a condom and 2 percent reported only insertive intercourse without a condom. Twenty-seven percent reported group sex, 25 percent reported fisting, 21 percent reported any recreational drug use, and 14 percent reported condomless intercourse while on drugs. About 9 percent reported injection drug use.

Two out of three of the men did not have another sexually transmitted infection upon being diagnosed with hep C. Meanwhile, 15 percent had gonorrhea, 7 percent had syphilis, 7 percent had chlamydia and 4 percent had both chlamydia and gonorrhea.

Of the 3,811 HIV-negative MSM who attended the clinic during the period of the study, just 15 percent received hep C testing.

The researchers concluded that "acute hepatitis C is a problem for HIV-negative MSM who have similar risks [to HIV-positive MSM]. HCV testing must be considered as a crucial part of sexual health screening in environments where risk factors or outbreaks of HCV exist."

To read a POZ/AIDSmeds feature on sexual transmission of hep C among HIV-positive gay men, click here.

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