



Special Populations

Women and Hepatitis C

Although more males than females are chronically infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV), hep C raises numerous concerns that are pertinent to women. Chief among these are issues relate to pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding because of the potentially infectious nature of hep C. Later in life, hepatitis C may also affect women around and following menopause. Women may also have questions about HCV transmission. This section discusses some of the common issues that women with hepatitis C face.

Women and Acute Hepatitis C

The two phases of hepatitis C infection are acute and chronic. Acute refers to an HCV infection that is less than six months old. A hep C infection that lasts more than six months is chronic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 15 to 25 percent of people infected with hepatitis C are able to spontaneously clear the virus from their bodies without the aid of treatment, usually within six months after becoming infected. While women have a 40 percent chance of clearing hep C, the probability for men is about 19 percent. Young women have an even better chance of clearing HCV. By the time women reach menopause, their spontaneous clearance rate is the same as it is for men.

Women with chronic hepatitis C infection tend to have slower progression of liver disease, including lower rates of cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer). A common theory for this is that estrogen seems to protect the liver. Also, naturally occurring interferon in women may provide some protection, especially before the onset of menopause. However, when women reach menopause, hepatitis C tends to accelerate at a rate similar to that of men.

Hepatitis C Risk Factors for Women

- **Household Risk** There hasn't been a documented case of hepatitis C passed through typical household activities. Experts advise to discard feminine hygiene products properly. Wrap napkins and tampons in tissue before tossing into a lined trash container. Be sure trash is out of the reach of pets and children. Do not share razors, cuticle scissors, nail clippers, toothbrushes or other items that may be exposed to blood.
- **Injection Drug Risk** A large 2017 study published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases* found

that women who inject drugs are 38 percent more likely than men to become infected with hepatitis C. Among the many possible reasons for this is the fact that women have a high rate of needle and syringe reuse, a practice known as receptive sharing. Stigma and other social barriers may also contribute to the higher rate of HCV infection in women who inject drugs. To protect yourself, look for programs in your community that provide tips and tools on safer drug use.

- Occupational Risk Occupations that are predominantly female may put women at risk for blood-to-blood contact and thus hepatitis C. Examples are nursing and other health care professions, janitorial and housecleaning industries, and the cosmetic and personal care industries. If you work closely with blood, following the safety guidelines for your employment situation should protect you from contracting hepatitis C. Sex workers, especially those who trade sex for drugs are at an increased risk of hepatitis C. Sex workers who inject drugs, including steroids and other hormones, are encouraged to learn how to do so safely.
- Sexual Risk Women who are in exclusively monogamous relationships, have a near-zero risk of transmitting or becoming infected with hepatitis C. The risk increases if you or your partner has HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases or open sores, cuts or wounds. Anal sex may pose a higher risk, particularly if any tissue is torn. Oral sex appears to present a near-zero risk for hepatitis C transmission. Current recommendations are that women in stable monogamous relationships do not need to change their sexual practices—unless they feel more comfortable doing so. The risk may be higher during a woman’s menstrual cycle, and many experts advise using protection during those times. Safer sex practices are recommended for those engaged in sex with multiple partners. Although there is no guaranteed prevention method, the use of barrier protection is advised.
- Transfusion Risks Prior to July 1992, the blood supply in the United States was contaminated with hepatitis C. As a result, approximately 250,000 women received contaminated blood products during caesarean sections. The blood supply in the United States has been very safe since 1992.

[Click here](#) to read more about HCV transmission and risk factors.

HCV and Supplements for Women

Herbs and dietary supplements may seem appealing, but some can cause serious harm. If you have hepatitis C, be sure to tell your health care provider about all the dietary supplements you take. People with cirrhosis should never use herbs except under strict medical advice. The same is true for people taking hepatitis C treatment medications, as supplements may interfere with the drugs you are taking.

[Click here](#) for more information about supplements, especially those to avoid if you have liver disease. A few supplements that women commonly take are mentioned below:

- **Black Cohosh** This herb is sometimes used for premenstrual complaints, painful periods and management of menopause symptoms. Black cohosh products have been linked to more than 50 instances of liver injury. People with hepatitis C should avoid black cohosh.
- **Calcium** This mineral is generally safe for the liver. Your medical provider can recommend the correct dose for your needs.
- **Multivitamins and Minerals** Standard doses and quantities of multivitamins and minerals are generally safe for people with non-cirrhotic hepatitis C. Postmenopausal women should take an iron-free or low-iron version unless the full-iron version is medically recommended.
- **Vitamin D** Often used in people with liver disease, vitamin D appears to be safe for the liver. Your health care provider can recommend the best dose for you.

Family Planning and Hepatitis C

Information about women with hepatitis C would not be complete without mentioning contraception, pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding. [Click here](#) for further info on family planning.

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