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**The Bridging Project: Strengthening the Community-Based Response to the  
HIV/HCV co-infection epidemic in BC  
November 23 & 24, 2011 - Prince George**

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# Sexual Transmission of HCV

The Bridging Project  
November 2011

# What we do know:

- In Canada roughly 300,000 people are HCV+, and 65,000 are HIV+. It is estimated that around 20% of people living with HIV are co-infected with HCV. This rate goes up significantly amongst HIV+ people who use IV drugs.
- HIV is transmitted via blood and sexual fluids (pre-cum, ejaculate, vaginal fluids/secretions, and anal secretions), as well as CSF and breast milk.
- HCV is transmitted via blood.

- HIV dies very quickly when exposed to air (approx. 15-30 seconds).
- HCV can stay viable on a surface for a significant amount of time (possibly several hours or more).
- HCV is a very small virus and can therefore exist in even microscopic amounts of blood (you would need to magnify it by one million to see it the size of a marble in your hand).

- HIV/HCV co-infected people are 5x more likely to get cirrhosis than those who are mono-infected. End-stage liver disease and hepatocellular carcinoma, both usually resulting from chronic HCV infection, are now leading causes of death not attributable to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) among HIV-infected persons in the United States.
- In Canada the rate of HCV transmission via sexual transmission is reported as 3%.
- Other countries have reported higher numbers, but it is thought that because of greater stigma around drug use in those countries, people are not always being honest about their risk factors.

- Studies show that HCV transmission between monogamous, long term partners is generally via shared drug or household equipment (razors, toothbrushes, etc), and not sexual activity.
- Studies also show that sexual transmission of HCV is more prevalent amongst people who have multiple partners, share sex toys, or engage in group sex, and those who have another sexually transmitted infection such as herpes, syphilis, or HIV (sores, chancres, blisters, lesions or other breaks in the skin create a way for virus to enter the body).

# Why is that?

- Group sex may be a particularly important risk factor for HCV transmission. If one receptive partner in a group is HCV positive, then blood containing HCV could be passed to other receptive partners by another participant's fingers, fist, or penis, or by sharing sex toys.
- Rougher sex practices, such as anal fisting and the use of sex toys can damage the rectal mucosa (the lining of the rectum) and the lining of the vagina.
- For women, other factors such as age and hormone levels can affect how delicate the vaginal lining is.

- There is some evidence that people engaged in higher risk sexual activities are also more likely to be using substances, which can put them at greater risk for virus transmission.
- A recent study showed that some groups of HIV-positive MSM (men who have sex with men) practice “serosorting,” which involves two HIV-positive men having unprotected sex, each aware of the other’s HIV status. However, it is not clear if these men are aware of the hepatitis C status of their sex partners.

- ‘Safer sex fatigue’ may have resulted in certain groups of MSM (and others) growing tired of hearing about, and practicing, safer sex.
- There is also some evidence that some people on HIV meds are engaging in more high-risk sex because they assume that treatment reduces the risk of transmitting HIV. However, risk factors for other STI’s remains present.

# Spread the word!!!

Using a new condom, barrier, or glove for each new partner will reduce the risk of HCV transmission by reducing the exposure to blood.

To read up on the studies mentioned here,  
or get more information, check out:

- Health Initiative for Men [www.checkhimout.ca](http://www.checkhimout.ca)
- BCCDC [www.bccdc.ca](http://www.bccdc.ca)
- CATIE [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)
- The Body [www.thebody.com](http://www.thebody.com)
- The Liver Foundation [www.liver.ca](http://www.liver.ca)
- HCV Advocate [www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org)
- HepCBC [www.hepcbc.ca](http://www.hepcbc.ca)

