

Hepatitis C & HIV co-infection

In Australia, it is estimated that about 13% of people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) also have hepatitis C.

When you get tested for or diagnosed with either HIV or hepatitis C it is important to check with your healthcare provider that you have been tested for both. Hepatitis C and HIV share similar routes of transmission so if you are at risk for one you are at risk for the other. It is not possible to know if you have HIV or hepatitis C unless you have a blood test.

Testing for hepatitis C and HIV

A blood test will check whether you have hepatitis C and/or HIV.

In some people who are co-infected, the results of the first blood test for hepatitis C (an antibody test) may be unclear or show a false negative result. This is because the HIV infection can decrease the amount of hepatitis C antibody 'markers' in your blood. You will also need a blood test that specifically looks for the hepatitis C virus. This is called a PCR test.

Why does coinfection matter?

- Evidence suggests that because HIV weakens the immune system, it can hasten the progression to cirrhosis, decompensated liver disease and lead to earlier development of liver cancer related to hepatitis C.

- HIV activates an immune response leading to inflammation which can further damage the liver.
- Early treatment for HIV is vital as improving immune function slows the progression of hepatitis C related liver disease.
- People living with HIV are less likely to naturally clear hepatitis C.
- The 'window period' for hepatitis C in people with HIV can be longer. That is that the time from exposure to when the hepatitis C shows up on a blood test is longer. In people without HIV it is three months but in coinfection it can be months longer.
- It is unclear what impact hepatitis C infection has on HIV progression.

Treatment and management of hepatitis C and HIV co-infection

With the new direct acting anti-viral (DAA) treatments, hepatitis C can now be cured with minimal to no side effects. For the majority of people this means taking one tablet a day for 12 to 24 weeks.

Data suggests that co-infected patients treated with DAA's have cure rates comparable to people who are infected only with the hepatitis C virus.

Medication for HIV is effective and sometimes as simple as one tablet a day. Taking medication for HIV is important as it suppresses the HIV virus and reduces the damage it does to your immune system.

Furthermore, treatment can now be used to prevent transmission. This means that if you are on treatment and your viral load, which is the amount of virus in your blood is undetectable (you will need regular blood tests to assess this) then you cannot pass the virus onto others. HIV can be well managed but not cured.

When starting HIV medication in the context of coinfection with hepatitis it is important to regularly monitor the hepatitis as flares can coincide with the commencement of HIV treatment. This is called immune reconstitution hepatitis and can happen due to the fact that the body has regained the ability to mount and immune response once starting on HIV medication.

Being co-infected can affect your treatments. Some HIV medications can interact with hepatitis C treatment medications and/or damage your liver. The extent of existing liver damage you have also influences this. It is possible to treat hepatitis C and manage your HIV effectively, however it is important that you are referred to a specialist doctor.

- Vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B is essential for people with hepatitis C and HIV.

Transmission and protection

- Hepatitis C and HIV are both passed on through blood-to-blood contact, therefore transmission of both viruses can be prevented by being blood aware.

- HIV is a sexually transmitted infection (STI), therefore condoms should be used to prevent transmission.
- It is possible for hepatitis C to be passed on through sex however this is predominately in men who have sex with men and when there is blood present. It is more common in the context of pre-existing HIV infection. Hepatitis C is not classified as an STI.
- If you are co-infected and having sex with someone who is HIV positive but not hepatitis C positive then you can talk to your doctor about the risk of hepatitis C transmission and any preventative measure you may need to take.

This info sheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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