Dear Alice,

Several years ago I contracted Hepatitis C from a blood transfusion. I am a female and was wondering the likelihood of transmitting it to my boyfriend during intercourse. What precautions can we take? Can it be transmitted during oral sex?

?C

Answer

Dear C,

The Hepatitis C virus is spread mainly through contact with an infected person’s blood and/or blood products via:

- Blood transfusions or organ transplants (particularly before 1992, when blood was not routinely screened for Hep C)
- Unsterilized or inadequately sterilized needles (from sharing I.V. needles for drugs or by an accidental needle-stick)
- Exposure through cuts, wounds, and medical injections (this includes getting body piercing or tattoos with contaminated equipment)

Among the hepatitis viruses, Hep C carries with it the lowest risk of sexual transmission, particularly when in the context of a monogamous, long-term relationship. It can happen, as can transmission from mother to child during birth, but both are uncommon occurrences. It would also be unlikely to transmit the Hepatitis C virus through oral sex.

If other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are not a concern to you and your boyfriend, the use of condoms is not absolutely necessary. However, you may want to use them to reduce the minor risk and provide some piece of mind. If you want, you and your boyfriend can consult with your health care provider for her/his advice. But remember, this is a matter of personal choice. For example, if you or your boyfriend feel safer and more relaxed using condoms, then there’s your answer.

For more information, check out the Related Q&As.

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