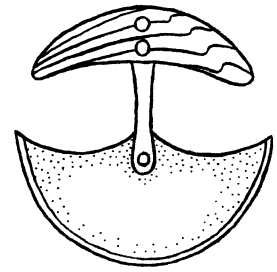


Information for Inuit Community Members

Fact Sheet Women and Hepatitis C



Women and Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C can affect women differently from men. This is because the liver plays an important role in regulating a woman's hormones (estrogen and progesterin).

Periods

It is common for women with hepatitis C symptoms to experience changes with their menstrual cycle. This may include missed or shorter periods. Any change in a woman's menstrual cycle should be discussed with her doctor, as it may or may not be related to hepatitis C.

Menstrual fluid contains blood and other body fluids. Because hepatitis C is transmitted by blood to blood contact, it is possible to transmit hepatitis C through menstruation.

Having sex while menstruating can increase the risk of transmitting hepatitis C, particularly if the sexual partner has any open cuts, wounds or abrasions. Using dental dams for oral sex, and condoms with male partners will reduce the risk of transmission.

Following standard precautions for infection control will lower the risk of transmitting hepatitis C through menstruation. This includes proper disposal of used tampons and sanitary pads in leak proof plastic bags.

Birth control

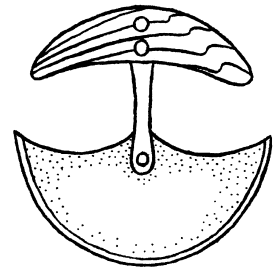
Some women with hepatitis C may not be able to tolerate the estrogen hormones in oral contraceptive pills. This is because the liver may have problems breaking down the hormones in the liver and blood.

So it is a good idea for women with hepatitis C who have liver damage or who are experiencing significant symptoms to discuss the use of the contraceptive pill with their doctor.

There are other forms of contraception which can be explored. This includes hormone injections or implants and barrier methods such as the diaphragm. It is important that all of these options are explored with a trusting doctor to find what is best for your situation.

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Menopause

Just as estrogen hormones in the oral contraceptive pill can cause problems for women with hepatitis C, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), often prescribed to manage symptoms of menopause, may not be well tolerated in the liver of women with hepatitis C.

The hormonal changes that women with hepatitis C experience as part of menopause are not all associated with the virus – seek the advice of your doctor or a hormone specialist for any problems experienced with menopause and HRT.

Pregnancy

Hepatitis C does not stop a woman from becoming pregnant and the risk of hepatitis C spreading from mother to child is low, about 5%.

Pregnant women with low levels of hepatitis C in their blood are unlikely to spread this virus to their baby in the womb. However, pregnant women with high levels of the virus, those with serious liver damage or those in the acute phase of infection, have a higher possibility of spreading hepatitis C to their babies while in the womb.

A baby born to a mother with hepatitis C will inherit the mother's antibodies and test antibody positive until the child is about 15-18 months of age. In most cases, the child's hepatitis C antibodies naturally disappear after about 18 months.

Women with hepatitis C on treatment (peginterferon and combination therapy) are required to use two forms of contraception during intercourse in order to ensure that they do not become pregnant during their treatment, and for six months following the treatment. Interferon and especially ribavirin (used together in combination therapies) can cause birth defects.

Breastfeeding

It is safe for women with hepatitis C to breastfeed.

While scientists have found hepatitis C in breast milk and colostrum (the breast fluid produced by the mother in the first few days of breastfeeding), there is not enough present to infect the baby with hepatitis C.

Cracked nipples and cuts, tears or scratches in or outside the baby's mouth may lead to hepatitis C transmission. It has been recommended that women with hepatitis C should use a pump to express their milk if they are experiencing cracked nipples.

