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## WHAT GAY MEN NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HEPATITIS C

Recently, two community forums were held in San Francisco alerting the community about evidence of rising hepatitis C infections in HIV+ gay men. Here are some useful facts:

### How do you get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a virus most frequently spread by blood-to-blood contact, including through sharing of injection drug works, tattoo equipment, tooth brushes or razors. Reports of transmission through sex are less common. However, in 2004, reports from Europe and more recently in New York and San Francisco suggest that hepatitis C transmission through sexual activity is occurring among gay and other men who have sex with men. This risk is associated with rougher or poorly lubricated unprotected anal penetration, including fisting, when microscopic tearing of anal tissues and bleeding may occur but not be noticed. Data also suggest that HIV-positive gay men who are receptive during unprotected anal intercourse can be at risk for infection.

### How common is Hepatitis C?

It's estimated that 180 million people are infected with HCV worldwide. In the US, 5 million are estimated to have HCV. Of the 1.2 million Americans who are HIV-positive, some 400,000 are estimated to be co-infected with hepatitis C.

### Get screened!

Hepatitis C symptoms may not appear for a long time, so if you think you may have been exposed to HCV or think you are at risk, ask your doctor for a test. Neighborhood clinics may offer testing if you are a patient and needle exchange sites will test if you are an injection drug user. But there is an urgent need for free walk in Hepatitis C test sites in San Francisco.

### HIV and HCV Co-infection

Data show that HIV-positive people who are co-infected with hepatitis C can progress more quickly to advanced HIV disease. People with HIV who contract HCV may also have a more difficult time treating and curing their HCV infection. There is new information that liver disease can occur more rapidly in gay men co-infected with HIV and HCV. So now is the time to find out your Hepatitis C status.

### Protect Yourself and Others.

Be mindful of the risks associated with HIV and hepatitis C. Protect yourself and your partners, especially if you are having sex that may produce blood or if you or your partner(s) have open wounds that may come in contact with each other. And do not share any injection equipment for shooting drugs, steroids or other substances. Use San Francisco's syringe exchange programs and use one needle for one shot.

### Treatment is available.

Treatment for hepatitis C is available, but it's difficult to tolerate and not effective in everyone. If you test positive for hepatitis C you may or may not need to be on treatment. Treatment may work better at clearing hepatitis C if it is started within the first 6 months after acquiring the infection. Consult your doctor for treatment options and weigh the pros and cons.

### Ask your health care provider for more information.

**Some doctors may not be aware of the risk of HCV infection through sex. You may need to explain why testing for HCV is important to you, especially if you are HIV-positive.**