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Hepatitis C and Body Fluids

What About Tears?

Can your family catch hepatitis C from your tears? Probably not, but there are studies out there that have detected the hepatitis C virus (HCV) in tear fluid. A French study appeared this last March in the Journal of Medical Virology that says their findings "suggest that tear fluid may transmit HCV but the source of HCV RNA in this fluid needs to be better understood." The virus was detected in the tears of 5 out of the 51 patients with Hep C that they tested.

Similar studies were done in Hamburg, Germany, and published in medical journals [J Clin Microbiol 33: 2202-2203, 1995, and Microbiol Immunol 38: 157-158, 1994], where all their samples tested positive for HCV. They state, "Remarkably, we regularly found greater amounts of amplification products in tear fluid and eye swabs compared to plasma using the same conditions for sample preparation."

What about transmission by tear fluid from patient to patient in a medical setting, such as during tests for glaucoma? I interviewed a local ophthalmologist, and he told me that he was very careful, and sterilized the instrument that actually touches the eye with alcohol. There are studies, however, that indicate that only heat can kill HIV, one of which was published in the September 1996 issue of Nature Medicine. It seems that HCV is not so contagious as HIV, but even harder to kill. The effectiveness of alcohol as a means of killing HCV remains in question.

Barbers

A study was done in Atlanta, GA [Ann Intern Med 126(5): 410-411 (1997)] that indicates that disinfectants used by barbers still contained HCV after 7 days. In an article written by Gurevich, et. al. [J Hosp Infect, Apr 1996], speaking of disinfection practices in dentistry, the authors state, "some of the liquid chemical products used were not suitable for sterilizing instruments, and 12% of respondents used incorrect contact times." It seems that there are insufficient studies at this time to really say. The ophthalmologist I talked to mentioned that there is equipment here in town that checks for glaucoma without direct contact with the eye. It might be a good idea to talk to your eye doctor before your next examination, to find out what kind of equipment is used for the glaucoma test. Personally, I want to avoid passing on hepatitis C, and I also want to avoid being infected with other viruses.⁴

Eye Conditions Related to HCV Speaking of eye doctors, there are eye conditions related to hepatitis C or to interferon treatments of which your doctor may not be aware. Hep C-caused problems may include:

Mikuliez's syndrome corneal ulceration

Mooren's corneal ulcersand

dry eyes (sicca or Sjogren's syndrome).

Rare complications found associated with interferon therapy were:

vascular retinopathy

optic neuropathy

retinal haemorrhages

cotton- wool spots and

retinal artery or vein obstruction.

If you are having vision problems, it may be a good idea to check with your local support group for materials to take with you to your appointment.

Joan Diemecke

Saliva may have infectious amounts of HCV in presence of high HCV viral load and gum disease “This study suggests that the saliva of individuals infected with hepatitis C may be infectious,” conclude the investigators, adding that “microscopic amounts of blood in the saliva due to gum disease may be responsible. People with HCV are cautioned not to share toothbrushes with other people in their household.” [*View*](#)

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