



The Pitt Men's Study

news and notes

winter 2009

High Rate of Hepatitis C Infection in Gay Men

Recent outbreaks of the hepatitis C virus (HCV) among men who have sex with men have been reported in Europe and the United States. Doctors believe that a significant number of cases were transmitted through sexual contact. "This finding is alarming," says Pitt Men's Study physician assistant Kristen D'Acunto. "HCV is usually associated with injection drug use because it's primarily spread through exposure to infected blood."

Information posted on the website *stopaids.org* suggests the high rate of infection among gay men may be the result of rough anal play. "'Rough anal play' relates to the specific sexual practices of gay men involved in the initial research, who were also HIV-positive," explained Dr. Ross Cranston, the Pitt Men's Study medical director. "This finding makes sense since these practices are more likely to result in mucosal tears resulting in bleeding, thus increasing the risk for HCV transmission."

Symptoms of acute HCV include jaundice, fatigue, abdominal pain, dark urine, loss of appetite and nausea. "It is also possible to have no symptoms at all," D'Acunto said. "Currently there is no vaccine and treatment is both difficult to undertake and has a limited success rate in HIV-positive individuals. So it's important to use a con-

dom during anal sex. It's also important to get tested for HCV so that you can learn how to avoid spreading it to others."

"HCV infection is determined by a simple blood test," adds Dr. Cranston. "If it comes back positive, that means you have been infected with the virus. It's important to note that some people recover from HCV without treatment. However, most people are chronically infected, which means the virus is in your system permanently. These are the folks that can go on to experience disease progression with abnormal liver function, the development of cirrhosis, and ultimately liver cancer."

For more information about HCV, you can go any of these helpful links:

<http://www.hivandhepatitis.com/>
<http://www.thebody.com/content/art6050.html>
<http://www.stopaids.org/news/hepc.pdf>

Oral HPV Testing



At your most recent Pitt Men's Study visit you may have been asked to provide us with a saline oral rinse sample. This is part of a sub-study that we are asking some of our men to participate in. Oral human papillomavirus (HPV or wart virus) infection has been recently identified as a cause of oropharyngeal cancer. Researchers are aiming to compare the persistence and prevalence of oral HPV infection among HIV-infected and HIV-uninfected men in the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS), of which the Pitt Men's Study is a part. In addition, they are attempting to identify and evaluate biological and behavioral risk factors for oral HPV infection. This research is needed to better understand both who is at risk of HPV-associated oral cancers and the magnitude of these risks.

Thank you to those who have participated!

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NEWS AND NOTES is published by the Pitt Men's Study. All information and opinions are the sole responsibility of the the Study and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the University of Pittsburgh or the National Institutes of Health.

All About Microbicides



It's possible you've read in the news recently about research being conducted in Pittsburgh to develop microbicides. Microbicides are substances intended to prevent or reduce the sexual transmission of HIV when applied topically inside the vagina or rectum. Much of the current microbicide research is taking place in Pittsburgh, directed by the Microbicide Trials Network.

The Microbicide Trials Network (MTN) is based at the Magee-Womens Research Institute and is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The network is comprised of 13 clinical trial units with 20 clinical research sites, one of which is located at the University of Pittsburgh, and spans seven countries.

Theoretically, microbicides could be produced in many forms, including gels, creams, suppositories, films, or as a sponge or ring that releases the active ingredient over time. Microbicides are also being developed for rectal use by men or women. Testing of many products will be required before developing a microbicide that is safe and effective against HIV as well as easy to use and acceptable to users and their sexual partners.

If proven effective, microbicides will have great impact among women in developing countries. HIV is often transmitted through unprotected heterosexual intercourse despite educational efforts promoting abstinence, monogamy and condoms, which often are not practical. Condoms may not be readily available at the time of sexual intercourse, or if they are, women can't always convince their partners to use them. Microbicides are seen as an HIV prevention method that women can control themselves.

Microbicides are also being developed specifically to protect the rectum that may be exposed through receptive anal intercourse and so would potentially benefit men who have sex with men in addition to women who have anal sex. Pittsburgh has emerged as a world leader in this field through the commitment of the both MTN and University of Pittsburgh investigators.

The University of Pittsburgh clinical research site is recruiting HIV-negative men and women for a study involving the collection of rectal tissue samples for use in the laboratory to test the effectiveness of microbicides in preventing HIV infection. If you are interested in learning more about the study, please call Anne Davis at 412-641-3381.

The Pitt Men's Study will update you on other microbicide studies as they become available, including what they involve and their recruitment criteria, as well as report the findings of studies now in progress.

How Can Drinking Water Help Your Blood Draw?



When you visit the Pitt Men's Study clinic, it is a safe bet that you are going to have your blood drawn. Success of the blood draw depends on both the skill of the clinician as well as the condition of your veins. The condition of your peripheral veins, the veins in your arms and legs, is dependent on several factors.

Some of the limitations are beyond our control, while others can be managed. Health conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure affect the integrity of the blood vessels, causing the veins to feel thick and hard and making the blood draw more difficult. In addition, with age the skin and blood vessels change, and again this increases the difficulty of the blood draw. These conditions are difficult to regulate. However there is one factor you can control - your water intake.

Proper hydration allows your peripheral veins to fill appropriately with blood when the tourniquet is applied to the arm, making it easier for the clinician to find a vein. Drinking at least 48 ounces of water prior to your visit can be an excellent means by which to ease the blood draw. If you can't drink that much, even a couple of glasses will help. In addition, you should avoid caffeine and nicotine before your appointment, if at all possible, as this causes blood vessels to constrict. If you have any questions prior to your visit, please contact the staff at the clinic.

A Message from Bill Buchanan

When I do HIV education, I always liken risk reduction to crossing Fifth Avenue in Oakland. I usually say something like: "Fifth Avenue is an incredibly busy street. It would be very easy to get hit crossing it. If I were to run out of this building and race headlong into Fifth Avenue without paying attention, I may actually make it across safely to the other side, but probably not; and if I were lucky enough to make it across unscathed, I'm sure it wouldn't take too many repetitions of that behavior before I wound up at UPMC Presby (or worse). However, if I go the crosswalk, wait for the light, and look for oncoming traffic before crossing, I may still get hit, but it would be far less likely."



I'm sure you've thought about risky sexual behaviors and those other behaviors that make it more likely that you will let your guard down and act less safe (things such as alcohol, drugs, and depression). When you determine what you like to do, you think about the relative risks of those behaviors and then eliminate the ones you can live without and find ways to make safer the ones you can't live without. If you decide on a good risk reduction plan and stick to it, there is still risk – condoms break, for instance – but you will go a long way toward reducing that risk and protecting yourself from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Not too long ago, I was crossing Fifth Avenue and forgot to look left until I was about to step off the curb (and I was stepping off a bit shy of the crosswalk). Wouldn't you know it - a PAT bus was barreling down right at me. It was going to stop, but it was going pretty fast and had I stepped down it may well have hit me. I was lucky that day, and I've resolved not to be so devil-may-care on Fifth Avenue again.

As evidenced by this incident, it's hard to stick to a risk reduction plan sometimes. Impaired judgment (again from alcohol, drugs, and depression), a false sense of invulnerability (perhaps you strayed from your plan and still are OK), assumptions about the status of a partner (wanting to believe that this god who wants you cannot possibly put you at risk), fatigue (it's more than 25 years of safer sex and HIV, and maybe it's gotten a bit old), or just that all-too-familiar human tendency to take things for granted (I've been crossing Fifth Avenue for 21 years now and never got hit, for instance) - all these are factors that can lead to anyone letting his guard down. Keep an eye out for backsliding (your own and that of your friends) and ask for support when you feel you are slipping (and be there for your friends when they need you).

The Pitt Men's Study is there for you as well. Feel free to give us a call when you feel the need to talk about something related to risky behavior, risk reduction, and safer sex. Your health is very important to us. If you don't have HIV, avoid it. If you have HIV, avoid passing it on to others or getting yourself reinfected, possibly with a drug-resistant strain of HIV that will undermine your current drug regimen and health. Don't be afraid or ashamed to ask – we're here for you; and if we all work together, we can keep each other and ourselves safe and healthy.

Stay safe and stay healthy. I'm looking forward to seeing you at your next appointment.



Pitt Men's Study Goes Green!

Recently the Pitt Men's Study clinic began recycling. So the next time you're ready to throw out your juice bottle, be sure to look for the big blue recycling container (there's one in each exam room) and toss it in there. Thanks!



Do your condoms contain nonoxynol 9?

Condoms and lubes that are **spermicidally lubricated** contain nonoxynol 9, a chemical known to increase the risk of HIV infection when used for anal sex.

Trojan, Durex, Beyond Seven, Kimono:
If it says “spermicidal lubricant” on the box, avoid it!