

Shared Crack Pipes May Spread Hepatitis C Virus

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A new study by the University of Victoria's Centre for Addictions Research (CARBC) suggests that the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) could possibly be passed on between crack smokers who share pipes. As the vast majority of new HCV infections in Canada are related to illicit drug use, this study—"HCV virus transmission among oral crack users: viral detection on crack paraphernalia"—underscores the need to include the specific risk group of crack smokers in HCV prevention efforts.

HCV is by far the most prevalent viral disease among street drug users. Its consequences cost Canadians an estimated \$500 million to \$1 billion each year. Epidemiological data has suggested that crack use may constitute a risk for HCV transmission, yet biological evidence towards the possibility of HCV transmission by crack paraphernalia sharing has been lacking until now.

"This study provides a potentially important piece of evidence towards explaining whether oral crack users can pass on HCV by way of risky crack use methods," says study leader Dr. Benedikt Fischer, director of CARBC's Illicit Drugs, Public Health and Policy Unit and a UVic sociology and medical sciences professor. "Our research affirms this risk, and calls both for systematic additional research and an emphasis on expanded HCV prevention measures targeting crack users."

The study was conducted with a population of 51 inner-city crack users in Toronto in 2006. It collected crack pipe implements shortly after their use, and tested their owners for their HCV antibody status. The crack

pipes were then tested biologically for evidence of the HCV. The virus was detected on one of 22 pipes tested whose owners had tested HCV antibody positive. Many crack users have severe chronic health problems, and have chronic burns and sores in their mouth areas that may facilitate oral HCV transmission.

“The results of this study are important for healthcare and policy makers,” says Dr. Bhagirath Singh, scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research’s (CIHR) Institute of Infection and Immunity. “It adds to the existing body of knowledge needed to enhance current strategies for HCV prevention, and reduce the transmission of HCV in high risk groups.”

Source: University of Victoria

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