

Contact with blood or body fluids: Protecting against infection

Blood and body fluids, such as saliva, semen and vaginal fluid, can contain viruses that can be passed on to other people. If you have contact with a person's blood or body fluids you could be at risk of HIV, hepatitis B or hepatitis C, or other blood borne illnesses. Body fluids, such as sweat, tears, vomit or urine may contain and pass on these viruses when blood is present in the fluid, but the risk is low.

What should I do if I come into contact with blood or body fluids?

If you come into contact with blood or body fluids, always treat them as potentially infectious. If you prick yourself with a used needle, hold the affected limb down low to get it to bleed. Do not squeeze the wound or soak it in bleach. Wash the area with warm water and soap.

If you are splashed with blood or body fluids and your skin has an open wound, healing sore, or scratch, wash the area well with soap and water. If you are splashed in the eyes, nose or mouth, rinse well with water. If you have been bitten, wash the wound with soap and water.

If you are sexually assaulted, go to the hospital emergency department as soon as possible. Reporting the incident immediately after a sexual assault can help to ensure that as much evidence as possible is obtained. For more information about sexual assault and to learn what support services are available, visit JusticeBC at

www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/bcs-criminal-justice-system/reporting-a-crime/what-is-a-crime/crime-examples/sexual-assault.

If you have come into contact with blood or body fluids in any of the ways described above, you may need treatment (such as a vaccine or medication) as soon as possible to protect against infection. It is important that you are assessed as soon as possible after the contact.

What will happen at the emergency department?

You will be asked to give informed consent in order for your blood to be tested for HIV, hepatitis B and C. Your treatment will be determined based on the type of

exposure to blood or body fluids and your test results. The health care provider may also try to determine whether the person's blood or body fluid with which you had contact may be infectious for HIV, hepatitis B and C. In case of possible exposure to HIV, the health care provider may start you on a course of antiviral medications without waiting for test results. These medications should be started as soon as possible, and are most effective if started within 2 hours of exposure. You will be referred to your own health care provider if you need to continue taking these medications for 1 full month.

To help protect you from hepatitis B disease, you may be given a hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immune globulin. Hepatitis B immune globulin contains antibodies that provide immediate but short-term protection against hepatitis B virus. The hepatitis B vaccine provides long lasting protection by helping your body make its own antibodies against the virus.

There is no vaccine to prevent infection with hepatitis C. Blood tests will show if you were exposed to hepatitis C or have acquired the virus.

If you have a serious cut or wound you may need to get the tetanus vaccine depending upon the type of wound and your immunization history.

To find out if you have acquired an infection as a result of the incident, you will need follow-up blood tests at 3 and 6 weeks and then at 3 months after the exposure.

What is the risk of getting HIV, hepatitis B or hepatitis C?

The risk of getting HIV, hepatitis B or C depends on the amount of virus in the blood or body fluid and the type of contact. For example, a piercing through the skin poses a greater risk than a splash on the skin.

The emergency department health care provider will tell you whether your exposure puts you at risk of these infections.

How do I prevent the spread of infection to others?

Sometimes it is not possible to know for a few months if

you have acquired an infection after an exposure to blood or body fluids. If you have, you can potentially transmit the infection to others. While you are waiting for your test results, follow these steps to help prevent spreading the infection to others:

- Do not have sex (vaginal, oral or rectal). If you have sex, use a male or female condom every time. For information on preventing STIs, see [HealthLinkBC File #08o Preventing sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#)
- Do not donate blood, plasma, organs, breast milk, tissue, or sperm
- Do not share toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, or other items that may have blood or body fluids on them
- Cover open cuts and scratches until they heal
- Carefully throw away anything with blood on it, such as tampons, pads, tissues, dental floss, and bandages. Put sharp items such as used razors or needles into a container and tape shut. Throw away in the garbage – do not place in a recycling box
- Do not share drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment such as needles and syringes, straws and pipes

Women who are breastfeeding and have been exposed to blood or body fluids should speak with their health care provider to find out if it is recommended that they continue to breastfeed.

If you become pregnant, see your health care provider or call the Oak Tree Clinic at BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre at 604-875-2212 or toll-free in B.C. at 1-888-711-3030.

How can I safely clean a spill or a wound?

When cleaning spills, wear clean, disposable gloves and always use absorbent material, such as paper towels, first. Then clean the area of the spill more thoroughly with soap and water, and then disinfect it with household bleach. A fresh solution of bleach should be used for disinfecting and can be prepared by mixing 1 part of bleach to 9 parts of water. The bleach solution should be left in contact with the spill area for at least 10 minutes before wiping it up.

Wear gloves when handling any body fluids or cleaning cuts, scrapes or wounds. Wash your hands carefully after disposing of your gloves in a plastic bag. Add

gloves to your first aid kit so you are prepared.

How do I protect myself and others?

Teach children to never touch used needles, syringes or condoms, and to tell an adult immediately if they find one. It is important to dispose of a used condom, needle or syringe quickly and carefully. Always wear clean disposable gloves or use tongs, pliers or another object to pick up used condoms, needles and syringes. Discard condoms in a plastic bag. Needles and syringes should be placed in a metal or plastic container with a puncture-proof lid and disposed of in the regular garbage or according to local by-laws. Always discard used gloves in a plastic bag and wash your hands carefully with warm water and soap. If the item used to remove the condom, needle or syringe is not disposable it should be disinfected with bleach.

Hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of germs. Wash your hands carefully with soap and warm water for at least 15 to 20 seconds. Waterless alcohol-based hand rinses can be used as long as hands are not heavily soiled.

Wash your hands before and/or after the following activities:

- Before preparing food and after handling uncooked foods
- Before eating or smoking
- Before breastfeeding
- Before and after providing first aid
- Before and after providing care to a person
- After using the toilet or changing diapers
- After handling blood or body fluids
- After coughing or sneezing

For more information

For more information, please see:

- [HealthLinkBC File #08m HIV and HIV tests](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #18a Tetanus and diphtheria \(Td\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #25a Hepatitis B vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #40a Hepatitis C virus](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #85 Hand washing: Help stop the spread of germs](#)

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.