

Contact with human blood or body fluids: Protecting against infections

Blood and body fluids, such as saliva, semen and vaginal fluid, can carry viruses that may spread to other people. If you come into contact with a person's blood or body fluids, you could be at risk of HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, or other bloodborne illnesses. Other fluids, such as sweat, tears, vomit or urine may only spread these viruses if blood is present in them, and even then, 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 are injured by a used needle or a sharp object, wash the affected area with soap and water only. Allow the wound to bleed freely, but do not squeeze the wound. Never use bleach or other disinfectant on the wound
- If blood or body fluids splash onto skin with an open wound, healing sore, or scratch, wash the area well with soap and water only
- If splashed in the eyes, nose or mouth, rinse well with running water. If you are bitten, wash the affected area well 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 preserve the evidence. For more information about sexual assault and to learn what support services are available, visit [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/bcs-criminal-justice-)

[system/reporting-a-crime/what-is-a-crime/crime-examples/sexual-assault](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/system/reporting-a-crime/what-is-a-crime/crime-examples/sexual-assault)

- If you have had 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 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 hepatitis C. Your treatment will be determined based on the type of exposure to blood or body fluids and your test results. Your 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 one 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 been infected, you could spread the infection to others. While waiting for your test results, follow these steps to help prevent spreading the infection to others:

- Avoid sexual activity (insertive, receptive or oral sex). If you have sex, use a condom (internal or external) every time. For information on preventing STIs, visit [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 metal or plastic container and tape it shut. Throw items away in the garbage – do not place them in the recycling
- Do not share drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment such as needles and syringes, straws and pipes

If you are breastfeeding or chestfeeding and have been exposed to blood or body fluids, speak with your health care provider to find out if you should continue to breastfeed or chestfeed.

If you become pregnant, visit 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 to wipe up the spill. Then clean the area of the spill 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 one part bleach to 9 parts water. The bleach solution should be left in contact with the spill area for at least 10 minutes before wiping it up.

Wear clean gloves when handling any body fluids or cleaning cuts, scrapes or wounds. Wash your hands immediately with soap and water 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 and adults who need support to never touch a needle, syringe or condom if

they find one. Tell them to find an adult or support person right away.

If you need to dispose of used needles, syringes or condoms, do so promptly and safely:

- Always wear clean disposable gloves or use tongs or pliers to pick up these items
- Place used condoms in a sealed plastic bag and put them in the garbage where children or pets cannot access them
- Place needles and syringes in a metal or plastic container with a puncture-proof lid. Do not recap the needle or break off the end. Always keep the sharp end pointed down and away from you. Do not put needles in household garbage or recycling. Take the sealed container to a pharmacy or local drop-off site
- Remove gloves if you are wearing them, discard them in a plastic bag and wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water
- If the tool you used (such as tongs, pliers) is not disposable, clean with soap and water and disinfect it with bleach or another suitable disinfectant

Washing your hands is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of germs. Wash all parts of your hands thoroughly with plain soap and water for at least 20 seconds (the length of the time it takes to sing the ABC or Happy Birthday song). If soap and water are not available, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, as long as your hands are not visibly soiled.

Wash your hands:

- Before and after preparing food, eating or feeding someone else
- Before breastfeeding or chestfeeding
- Before and after providing first aid
- Before and after providing care to a person
- After using the washroom or helping someone use the washroom
- After changing diapers
- After coughing, sneezing or using a tissue
- After handling blood or body fluids
- After handling shared objects
- After handling pets or other animals
- After handling garbage and animal waste

For more information

For more information, please visit:

- [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](#)