Why is HIV transmission a risk in healthcare settings?

As a healthcare worker, certain situations put you at risk of HIV. For example, an HIV-positive patient's blood could get into your body via a wound made by a used needle or sharp equipment.

Other factors, such as where in the world you work and the quality of HIV care determine your risk of HIV infection. In some countries, safety standards may be lower, or you may be working in unfamiliar working conditions.\textsuperscript{1}

Overall, HIV transmission from a patient to a healthcare worker is very rare.\textsuperscript{2}

How can you get HIV in a healthcare setting?

There are three main ways HIV can be transmitted in a healthcare setting, including:

1. if a needle that had been in a HIV-positive patient’s body pierces your skin (needle-stick injury)
2. if infected blood gets into your mucous membrane – such as the eyes, nose or mouth
3. if infected blood gets into an open cut in your skin.\textsuperscript{3}

If you are a healthcare worker and have experienced one of these three situations, you are said to have ‘occupational exposure to HIV’. This means you may be at risk of developing an HIV infection.

It is important to seek help from another healthcare worker immediately if you have experienced one of these situations, and take an HIV test.

How can I reduce my risk of HIV when I work in healthcare?

Most cases of occupational exposure to HIV are because of needle-stick injuries, where a mistake has been made when handling a needle, or it has not been disposed of properly.\textsuperscript{4}

There are a number of things you can do to reduce your risk of HIV at work. They are known as ‘universal precautions’ and you should follow them when working with every patient. For example: 5
• wear protection such as a mask, gown, goggles and gloves
• cover up any cuts or abrasions with plasters/bandages
• handle sharp equipment carefully
• dispose of sharp equipment in a solid container
• clean up blood spills immediately
• wash your hands with soap after contact with a patient’s blood.6

How can I prevent HIV if I think I’ve been exposed to the virus?

If you think you have been exposed to HIV:

• wash the area with soap and water
• encourage bleeding by pressing around the injury
• report the incident straight away
• find out the patient’s HIV status – ask a doctor to do this and make sure the patient has given consent to an HIV test.7

If the patient is HIV-positive, you may be able to take treatment called PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) which is taken after you have been exposed to HIV.

PEP attacks HIV, preventing it from making copies and multiplying throughout your body.8 Talk to another healthcare professional about your options.

2. CDC (2013) ‘Occupational HIV Transmission and Prevention Among Health Care Workers’
5. CDC (2013) ‘Occupational HIV Transmission and Prevention Among Health Care Workers’
7. Aidsmap, ‘Occupational exposure and healthcare workers’ [accessed online 20/04/2015]

Last updated: 14 July 2017
Last full review: 01 May 2015
Next full review: 01 May 2018