

HIV & occupational exposure fact sheet

Does your job put you at possible risk of HIV exposure?



Follow these basic procedures to minimalise the likelihood of HIV infection at work.

What is occupational exposure to HIV?

- Your skin is broken by equipment that has been in contact with a patient's blood.
- A patient's blood gets into a mucous membrane, such as your eye.
- A patient's blood gets into an open cut in your skin.

The most likely cause of HIV exposure is from a contaminated needle, known as a needlestick injury.¹

When am I at risk?

You can only get HIV if the patient you get the injury from has HIV. The risk of HIV transmission is greater if:

- Your injury is deep
- You can see blood on the equipment
- You were pricked by a needle used in the patient's vein/artery ²

Health and safety tips

Follow these standard health and safety procedures with all patients to prevent HIV exposure in a healthcare setting. Don't make assumptions about who has HIV and who doesn't.

- wear protection such as a mask, gown, goggles and gloves
- cover up any cuts or abrasions with bandages or plasters
- handle sharp equipment carefully
- dispose of sharp equipment in a solid sharps container
- clean up blood spills immediately
- wash your hands with soap after contact with a patient's blood³

Safe medical waste disposal

Contaminated medical equipment can be a health hazard if it is not disposed of correctly. This includes:

- needles

- syringes
- blood bags

you can ensure your medical waste is disposed of safely by putting it in a solid, or 'sharps' container.⁴

If you think you've been exposed

Occupational HIV exposure is rare but should be managed immediately as an urgent medical concern. If you think you've been exposed to HIV, follow these recommended steps:

1. Immediately wash the injury with water and soap.
2. Encourage bleeding by pressing around the injury.
3. Talk to a healthcare professional – they will assess your risk of HIV and other blood-borne infections.
4. They may suggest that you take post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which is a type of emergency HIV treatment that prevents HIV infection.
5. PEP only works if it is started within 72 hours of HIV exposure, so if you are concerned about exposure you should not delay your report.^{5 6}
6. Follow up with an HIV test.
7. Report the incident so that further precautions can be made in the future.

Know your rights

As a healthcare worker you should be aware of your own HIV status.

You have the right to:

- a safe working environment
- not disclose your own HIV status or exposure
- an HIV test to confirm your status.

Know your patients' rights

Healthcare workers have the responsibility to treat all of their patients with equal care.

Your patients have the right to:

- not disclose their HIV status
- an HIV test with their consent
- seek confidential advice

Additional Resources

Avert aims to provide healthcare workers and professionals working in HIV care with the key information and resources to support your work. Read more at our [professional pages](#).

Also see our [fact sheet on PEP](#).

Remember, you have not done anything wrong; it is important to request support from your employer.

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- 1. World Health Organisation & International Council of Nurses 'Health Care Worker Health and Safety: Preventing Needlestick Injury and Occupational Exposure to Bloodborne Pathogens' [accessed March 2016]
- 2. World Health Organisation & International Council of Nurses 'Health Care Worker Health and Safety: Preventing Needlestick Injury and Occupational Exposure to Bloodborne Pathogens' [accessed March 2016]
- 3. World Health Organisation & International Council of Nurses 'Health Care Worker Health and Safety: Preventing Needlestick Injury and Occupational Exposure to Bloodborne Pathogens' [accessed March 2016]
- 4. WHO (2015) 'Health-care waste management'
- 5. Kuhar, D.T. et al (2013) 'Updated US Public Health Service guidelines for the management of occupational exposures to human immunodeficiency virus and recommendations for postexposure prophylaxis' Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology 34(9):875-892
- 6. WHO (2014, December) 'Guidelines on post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV and the use of co-trimoxazole prophylaxis for HIV-related infections among adults, adolescents and children: Recommendations for a public health approach - December 2014 supplement to the 2013 consolidated ARV guidelines'

Last full review: 21 March 2018

Last updated: 28 March 2018

Next full review: 21 March 2021