

Frequently Asked Questions about...

Bloodborne Pathogens

Q. What is a bloodborne pathogen?

A. A bloodborne pathogen is a type of bacteria or virus that is spread by contact with an infected individual's blood or other potentially infectious body fluids. Examples of diseases caused by bloodborne pathogens include human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

Q. How does someone contract a bloodborne pathogen?

A. Bloodborne pathogens are spread through blood and other body fluids (most often semen or vaginal secretions). A person can be exposed to a bloodborne pathogen if he/she receives contaminated blood or blood products, shares needles (includes needles used during tattooing or body piercing), or has unprotected sexual intercourse. Exposure may also occur if someone comes into contact with contaminated equipment such as blood glucose monitoring devices, podiatry equipment, or any other device that has contacted either blood or potentially infectious body fluids and has not been properly cleaned and disinfected.

Q. Why may patients or staff in healthcare facilities be at risk for contracting bloodborne pathogens?

A. Patients located near others, such as in shared rooms, may have opportunities to be exposed to blood or body fluids of other patients. Patients may receive blood or blood products, injections, or blood glucose monitoring, which are all potential ways of contracting a bloodborne pathogen. Healthcare providers or environmental services staff who do not use proper personal protective equipment or adequate hand hygiene may facilitate the transmission of bloodborne pathogens from one person to another and/or may contract a bloodborne illness themselves. Finally, patients may have a weakened immune system, which make them more susceptible to infection. Patients or staff may not have received protective vaccines for certain bloodborne pathogens (e.g., hepatitis B). However, it is important to note that with appropriate prevention measures, bloodborne pathogens should *never* be transmitted.

Q. Can diseases caused by bloodborne pathogens be treated?

A. Yes and no. Often there is no cure for bloodborne diseases like HIV or hepatitis. Certain medications may prevent illness from worsening, but it is not usually possible to fully eliminate the virus.

Q. What is the best way to prevent contracting an illness associated with a bloodborne pathogen?

A. The best way to prevent contracting a bloodborne-associated illness is to avoid exposure to blood or other potentially infectious bodily fluids. Blood and blood products should be screened for bloodborne pathogens before administration. Medical procedures such as injections and blood glucose monitoring should be conducted with clean equipment (such as fingerstick devices, blood glucose meters), proper hand hygiene, and appropriate personal protective equipment. Sexual intercourse should always involve the use of a barrier method of protection, such as a condom, to decrease the risk of transmission of pathogens. Finally, vaccines, if available and indicated, should be administered to susceptible individuals.

Contact your local health department if you have additional questions about bloodborne pathogens