

Hepatitis C infection control in the home

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus, so infection only occurs when the blood of a person infected with the virus enters the bloodstream of someone else (blood-to-blood contact). Hepatitis C in Australia is most commonly transmitted through sharing contaminated injecting equipment. It is not casually transmitted. You can't be infected with the hepatitis C virus from kissing or hugging, by sharing a cup or food, or from a toilet seat.

Households are an environment where family and friends can be accidentally exposed to a range of infections, including viruses that live in the blood. The risk of hepatitis C transmission occurring within homes is extremely low and you can minimise this even further by a common-sense approach to infection control. The main thing to remember is that hepatitis C is only transmitted by blood-to-blood contact. Talk to your family about how the hepatitis C virus can be transmitted in the home so that they can avoid infection.

About your skin

Your skin is a barrier that protects you against harmful bacteria and viruses. When your skin is broken, with a graze, cut or puncture wound, germs and viruses can enter your bloodstream. Protecting your skin means looking after your own cuts and wounds. Keep them covered with waterproof dressings. Washing your hands with soap and running water after dressing wounds will help prevent the spread of infections to others.

Personal toiletry items and grooming equipment

Personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail files, nail clippers, tweezers and electric clippers (unless used with the safety guard in place) can penetrate the skin and come into contact with blood. Keep these items for your own personal use and out of the reach of children. Keeping one or two spare, unused toothbrushes and disposable razors on hand for friends or relatives who may stay over is a good idea.

First aid at home

Be blood aware when treating injuries in the home.

- After use, first aid equipment such as scissors or tweezers should be washed in a warm water and detergent solution, and then dried before storing.
- Disposable gloves are recommended when applying creams or lotions to other people's broken skin.
- Avoid contact with blood and other body fluids by using disposable latex gloves when giving first aid to another person.
- Avoid contact with blood when assisting a conscious, injured person by asking them to apply pressure to the wound with their own hands. If the bleeding person is unconscious, or is a child, use a pad of clothing between the wound and your hands before applying pressure. This way you will avoid contact with their blood.
- Cover any minor cuts, chapped skin or open wounds of all household members with a waterproof dressing. This protects any possible entry points for the virus through broken skin.
- Wash hands immediately after administering first aid.

Blood spills

In the right environment, the hepatitis C virus can remain alive outside the body in very small amounts of blood for some time. Blood spills on surfaces, contaminated wound dressings and personal items like razors, etc, have the potential to transmit the hepatitis C virus. You can protect against this by treating all blood as if it is potentially infectious.

Blood should be cleaned from household surfaces or equipment, for example: floors, furniture, toilet seats, handrails and kitchen benches. Clean up blood spills as soon as possible.

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- The injured person should clean up the blood spill if possible. An adult family member can take responsibility for cleaning up after children, frail or elderly people.
- Prior to cleaning up blood spills wash and dry your hands, then put on disposable latex gloves. Soak up as much of the spill as possible with tissues or paper towels.
- Collect all bloodstained, disposable items such as sanitary towels, tampons, dressings, tissues, incontinence pads, gloves and paper towels used in the clean up. Put all items into a leak-proof plastic bag and tie securely, repeat with a second plastic bag and when secured, throw out with your regular household rubbish.
- Clean the area with a warm water and detergent solution.
- Dispose of gloves, wash your hands with soap and water and then dry them on a clean towel.

Disposing of sharps at home

Uncapped, used needles and syringes (fits) pose a risk for injury and blood-borne virus transmission. Used needles should never be recapped, bent or broken. All sharps, such as needles and syringes used in the home should be discarded directly into a clearly labeled, puncture-resistant container (sharps bin). When the sharps bin is almost full it can be taken to a needle and syringe program (NSP) to swap it for a new container.

For the location of a NSP in your area call Directline on 1800 888 236.

Handle all sharps carefully:

- Avoid touching the pointy end of needles/syringes, pick the needle and syringe up firmly by the plastic barrel (the blunt end).
- Never recap needles.
- Do not open or put your hand inside the sharps container.
- Use a dustpan and broom to clean up broken glass.

Contact with blood

If contact with blood or other body fluids occurs:

- Wash the blood or body fluids away as soon as possible, preferably with soap and water.
- Rinse away any blood or other body fluids from the eyes, nose and mouth with plenty of water.
- Injuries such as small cuts and needlestick injuries should be washed with normal saline or water. Allow the wound to bleed freely while washing and then cover.

Useful contacts

Hepatitis Victoria

Hepatitis Infoline 1800 703 003

Office telephone: (03) 9380 4644

Email: info@hepvic.org.au

Web: www.hepvic.org.au

Directline

24 hour, 7 day drug and alcohol counselling, information and referral. Information about needle syringe programs.

Telephone: 1800 888 236

Harm Reduction Victoria (formerly VIVAIDS)

Statewide, membership-based organisation for drug users. Information and education about drug use and harm minimisation.

Telephone: (03) 9329 1500

Email: vivaid@vivaid.org.au

Web: www.vivaid.org.au

Useful publications

Impact

Available from Hepatitis Victoria

Useful Websites

Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL)

www.aivl.org.au

National peak organisation representing the Infection2state and territory drug user organisations.

This infosheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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