



# Factsheet on Blood-borne Viruses

## Introduction

When performing a procedure such as **ear or body piercing, tattooing**, or sharing body jewellery, where the skin may be broken, heightens the risk of letting serious, life threatening microbes into the blood stream.

These guidelines will give information and advice on organisms that can live in the blood, how they could infect you, and methods of protecting yourself from the risk of blood-borne infections.

## What is blood-borne infection?

This is any infection which is transferred from the bloodstream of one person to the bloodstream of another. Most such infections are caused by viruses, the most important of which are listed below.

## How is blood-borne infection spread?

By infected blood or bloodstained body fluids coming into contact with:

- An open lesion on the skin or more rarely by blood in the eye or mouth (It is common for body piercings to become sore and bleeding, especially with constant changing of body jewellery)
- By injury with a sharp object contaminated with infected blood (as in self piercing)

## What causes blood-borne infection?

### Hepatitis B

This is a virus which causes a high temperature, 'flu like' symptoms, dark urine and jaundice (yellowness) in about a third of those infected. A minority of patients (less than 1 in 100) suffers a serious illness and may even die. Most people however make a complete recovery after about six months. Others (about 1 in 10 of those infected) may not be aware they have contracted the infection, but they can still suffer the long-term complications which include liver disease, liver failure and cancer.

## Hepatitis C

This is a virus which usually causes mild or no symptoms on initial infection. However, as with hepatitis B, patients may go on to develop long term liver disease and may not be aware they have contracted the infection. At the present time there is no vaccination available.

## HIV

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus attacks the body's immune system and renders it ineffective against many infection diseases. When initially infected, patients occasionally have mild flu-like symptoms and then usually remain completely well for many years.

Eventually the body's defences become more and more depressed, other infections and symptoms are seen, including weight-loss, fever and night sweats.

The disease progresses until the person suffers from AIDS.

To interrupt transmission of HIV infection between mothers and babies, the Department of Health in England recommends universal testing of all women receiving antenatal care.

## How can I prevent the risk of blood-borne infection?

You will notice that those with any of the above infections may not show any signs of illness at all, although they can still be infectious to others. In hospitals now it is standard practice to treat blood and articles contaminated with blood from any person as if it were infectious. Adopting this practice yourself and not sharing body jewellery and piercing paraphernalia will help to protect you against these infections.

If you are thinking about having a body piercing talk it through with your parents, guardian or a responsible adult first. Investigate the body piercing providers. How long have they been trading? What after care support do they offer? What are their infection rates?

If you decide to go ahead with the procedure make sure that the body piercer follows the simple rules below to protect you, where contact with blood is anticipated.

1. Practice good hand hygiene. Wash and dry hands well before and after any procedure where skin is pierced. Wear single use disposable gloves. Ideally gloves should be made of latex or vinyl.
2. Cover all cuts, grazes and rashes with a waterproof plaster.
3. Only use sterile instruments to breach skin. Ideally these should be once only use e.g. ear piercing sets. Otherwise articles may be sterilised by autoclaves. Premises using autoclaves should ensure that they are used by trained staff and maintained regularly.
4. Articles soaked in disinfectants should not be considered sterile.
5. Blood spillage should be cleaned using a bleach solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water) which should be kept in contact with the spill for 2 minutes. Bleach tablets are ideal to ensure an adequate concentration is reached. Always follow the directions.
6. Personnel should have written instructions on what action to take if injured with contaminated sharp equipment.
7. Dispose of sharp equipment carefully in a British Standard sharps container. These should be collected and disposed of by a licensed contractor along with any contaminated waste produced.