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AIDS

and the workplace

HEALTH SERVICE STAFF



A NUPE HEALTH & SAFETY PUBLICATION

What you need to know

AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). This can damage the body's defence system so it cannot fight certain infections. HIV can only be transmitted in very limited ways.

Ordinary social and work contact with an infected person is safe for both colleagues and the public.

If your job involves caring for people with AIDS, it is important that you follow the correct health and safety procedures when dealing with the blood or body fluids of the infected person and any contaminated materials - but otherwise you are in no danger of catching HIV.

How AIDS is spread

People with AIDS have HIV in their blood and other body fluids. The virus does not survive long outside the body and is killed by simple household bleach. There is no evidence that HIV can be transmitted from tears or saliva of an infected person.

HIV can be transmitted:

- by sexual intercourse with an infected person when blood, semen and vaginal fluids can be exchanged.
- when infected blood or body fluids get into your bloodstream, e.g.

inoculation with a contaminated needle.

- from an infected mother to her baby.

Taking Care

The main risk to NUPE members at work comes from accidental inoculation or contamination of an open cut or graze with the blood or body fluids of an infected person.

- The virus is not spread through the air or by touch.
- It is not passed by coughing, sneezing or shaking hands.
- It is safe to share cups, knives and forks.
- It is safe to share washing and toilet facilities.

People with AIDS need care, support and understanding. Misplaced fear and staff refusing to work alongside those with HIV only causes unnecessary suffering. **AIDS is no excuse for prejudice and discrimination.** Only staff who need to know should be told if a patient or client is infected with HIV or has AIDS. This information must be kept strictly confidential. Any member of staff who breaks this confidentiality may be subject to disciplinary action by their employer.

General Health Precautions for Health Care Staff

As HIV is transmitted in such limited ways, basic health and safety precautions are appropriate for most NUPE members. These precautions will also protect against other infections such as hepatitis.

Safe disposal of clinical waste and 'sharps'

- Make sure all clinical waste is properly bagged and identified in accordance with health and safety rules.
- Dispose of 'sharps' in a properly constructed container, clearly marked. Do not put 'sharps' into plastic waste sacks or laundry bags.

Safe disposal of spillages and contaminated materials

Follow safety procedures for clearing up spillages and disposing of contaminated materials. Wear rubber gloves and overalls when clearing up spillages of blood and body fluids. Contaminated surfaces should be disinfected. (For advice on disinfection and sterilisation of HIV, see "HIV - the causative agent of AIDS and related conditions" revised 1990, published by ACDP. See 'More Information' Section.) Always wash your hands after any contact with contaminated material. Do not use bleach on your skin.

Protect existing wounds and prevent cuts

You should cover any existing cuts and grazes you may have with waterproof dressings. If you do cut or graze yourself wash liberally with soap and water. Report the accident to your supervisor and make sure that the accident is recorded.

Taking Blood Samples and Other Specimens

Nurses, phlebotomists and other staff whose jobs involve taking specimens from infected patients, must be specially careful. It is most important to avoid cuts or puncture wounds which can be contaminated with infected blood or body fluids.

- Specimens should only be taken by trained and experienced staff.
- Gloves and gowns or aprons should be worn. Where there is a risk of splashing, eye and mouth protection should also be worn.

- Needles should not be re-sheathed. Disposable sharps should be put in a suitable, marked container for disinfection or sterilisation.
- Try to avoid splashes or spills. Disinfect contaminated surfaces, and the outside of specimen containers if necessary.
- Specimen containers should be closed, labelled and sealed in plastic bags. (For further details of correct procedures, see "Safe working and the prevention of infection in clinical laboratories". Published by HSC, available from HMSO and bookshops.)
- If you do have a needle-stick injury or cut, let the wound bleed freely and wash liberally with soap and water. Report accidents promptly.

Nurses

Nurses caring for AIDS patients should be fully informed of any risks and the appropriate precautions to be taken. Basic health and safety precautions should be taken when dealing with blood and body fluids from all patients. See 'general precautions for health care staff.'

Caring for patients

It is not necessary to adopt isolation measures for patients infected with HIV. However, nurses who are required to take specimens from infected patients should follow the safety precautions listed under 'taking blood samples and other specimens'. Gloves, gowns or aprons and eye protection should be provided for these procedures. Patients with AIDS or who are HIV antibody positive need skillful and sympathetic nursing.

Safe disposal of waste

Clinical waste must be properly bagged and disposed of. Contaminated needles and other 'sharps' are especially dangerous. Always dispose of sharps into sharps containers that are puncture-proof and correctly marked. (For further details see "The safe disposal of clinical waste". Published by HSC, available from HMSO.)

Opportunistic Infections

Patients with AIDS are at risk from infections which healthy people can easily resist. Normal hospital infection control measures should be rigorously followed for the sake of the patient with AIDS.

Ambulance Staff

In most cases, normal infection control measures will prevent any risk of contracting HIV from patients. No special precautions are needed unless AIDS patients are bleeding or incontinent. Suitable infection control measures are listed here. See also "general precautions for health care staff".

Mouth to mouth resuscitation

There have been no recorded cases of HIV being transmitted by giving mouth to mouth resuscitation. However, when giving respiratory resuscitation to patients you should, where possible, use the equipment provided for that purpose.

Protective clothing

No special clothing is needed unless the patient is bleeding or incontinent. In these cases, plastic gloves and disposable aprons or gowns should be worn. HIV is not transmitted through the air or skin contact, so respiratory protection is not needed. Goggles are required only when there is a risk of blood splashing into eyes.

Contaminated clothing

Disposable clothing e.g. plastic gloves and aprons, and contaminated waste, should be put into yellow bags and disposed of according to local rules. Washable clothing and linen that is contaminated with blood or other body fluids should be put into marked bags and sent to the appropriate laundry.

Disinfection of equipment and vehicles

Equipment that has been contaminated with blood or other body fluids should be disinfected using hypochlorite solution or other chlorine releasing compounds. Equipment may also be sterilised if necessary using an autoclave or other standard procedures. Hypochlorite is recommended for clearing up spillages of blood or other body fluids. Fumigation of vehicles is not necessary and could be hazardous to staff. Extra care should be taken if gluteraldehyde is used, as this chemical can cause allergic reactions.

General Hygiene

Cover cuts and grazes with waterproof dressings. If you get blood or body fluids on your skin, wash with soap and water. Report any accidents promptly and make sure they are recorded.

Laundry Staff

Laundry staff are put at risk by careless sorting of laundry and waste. Occasionally, sharps and other waste is found among linen sent for cleaning. Laundry staff should watch out for this hazard. Other staff must take care when bagging clothes and linen for laundering.

- Any washable clothes and linen that are stained with blood or semen should be washed in a well maintained washing machine on the hot wash cycle, or boiled before hand washing. Non-washable items should be dry cleaned.
- Bedding should be washed on the hot wash cycle. Linen that is heavily contaminated with blood or excrement should arrive in a special bag. This linen should be handled wearing gloves and an apron. Dispose of gloves and apron after use into a yellow plastic bag.
- Cover any cuts or grazes you may have with waterproof dressings. If you get blood or excrement on your skin, wash thoroughly with soap and water.
- Remember, HIV is only passed on if the virus enters your bloodstream. If you cut or prick yourself with sharp objects left in laundry, let the wound bleed then wash with soap and water and cover with a dressing. Report all accidents promptly and make sure they are recorded.

Hospital Porters

Contact with patients

HIV can only be passed on from blood to blood not by skin contact. So special protective clothing is only necessary if patients are bleeding or incontinent and there is a risk of getting their body fluids on yourself. In these cases, disposable gloves and aprons or gowns should be put into yellow infected waste bags after use. Masks and goggles are not necessary when in contact with AIDS patients or patients with HIV.

Personal Hygiene

Cover cuts and grazes with waterproof dressings. Always wash your hands before eating, drinking or smoking.

Transporting specimens safely

Do not handle any specimens which are broken, leaking or unlabelled. All specimen containers should be carried in specially designed racks or boxes. Bottles containing infectious material should be sealed in plastic bags and labelled. If a specimen container is dropped and broken,

report this immediately to your supervisor. Do not attempt to clean up the spillage unless you have been taught the correct procedure.

Waste disposal

When moving waste sacks, watch out for sharp objects that may be carelessly mixed in with other rubbish. Used needles, glass and other 'sharps' should be disposed of in properly constructed sharp containers. If you find sharps loose in waste sacks, report this to your supervisor.

Accidents

If you cut or prick yourself on a used needle or other sharp, let the wound bleed then wash well with soap and water. Report the accident to your supervisor and make sure that it is recorded. If you get blood or other body fluids on your skin, wash off with soap and water.

Mortuaries and post-mortem rooms

Local rules for the prevention of Hepatitis B infection will also prevent infection by HIV. (Details of precautions are described in "Safe working and the prevention of infection in the mortuary and post-mortem room". Published by HSC, available from HMSO.) Only experienced anatomical pathology technicians should assist in post-mortems of patients with AIDS or HIV infection.

Disposable gloves and aprons should be worn when transporting all bodies to the mortuary or post-mortem room. If patients have died of AIDS or Hepatitis B, the body should be enclosed in a plastic bag to prevent the spread of infectious material.

Community Staff

You can be quite sure of being safe when working in the home of someone who has AIDS by following these guidelines.

General household cleaning

Normal standards of hygiene will protect you from HIV and other household germs. It makes sense to wash up in water hot enough to need gloves, using detergent. Use different cleaning cloths and gloves for kitchen and bathroom.

Dealing with blood and vomit

If possible these should be cleaned up by the person they came from. If you have to clean them up, wear rubber gloves (check they have no holes) and a plastic or plastic-coated apron. Dispose of blood, vomit or excrement down the toilet, clean surfaces with household bleach (1 measure of bleach to 10 measures of water), and disposable cloths. Dispose of cloths down the toilet or in plastic bags (see "disposal of waste"). After cleaning up, wash your gloves in very hot water, then wash your hands with soap and hot water.

Washing clothes and linen

Wash clothes and bedding on the hot wash cycle in a washing machine. Heavily soiled bedding should be handled wearing rubber gloves and sent to the local authority laundry service.

Disposal of waste

Household rubbish is not a risk and can be disposed of in the normal way. Used tissues and tampons should be flushed down the toilet. Soiled dressings and sanitary towels should be burnt. If this cannot be done in your client's home, the dressings etc. should be sealed inside two yellow plastic bags, one inside the other. Special arrangements should be made for the local authority to collect and incinerate this waste.

Injection needles

If your client uses injection needles, be very careful not to prick yourself on one of these. Your client should dispose of used needles in a puncture-proof container or wrapping. Your client should sterilise non-disposable needles in the normal way.

Accidental splashes

If you accidentally get your client's blood or excrement on your skin, there is no cause for alarm, wash thoroughly with soap and hot water.

Cuts or grazes should always be covered with waterproof dressings for protection. Report any accidents you have to your supervisor and make sure it is recorded.

Consideration for your client

As people with AIDS cannot fight off infections very well you should not visit them if you are ill. Ask your department's doctor if you are in any doubt.

Is it true that....?

Is AIDS a Gay Disease?

NO At the moment the majority of people in this country with HIV are gay men but in other countries this is not the case. It just hit the gay male community first. Anyone can get HIV from infected blood or body fluids entering their blood. That is why important for us all to follow safe working practices. Talk of a 'gay plague' is just prejudice or ignorance.

Is it dangerous to work with someone who has HIV?

NO The virus cannot be passed on in normal work situations or through usual social contacts. Only a minority with the virus itself have developed AIDS. There is no danger in working alongside someone with the virus or with AIDS itself.

Can you catch HIV from cups, saucers, cutlery?

NO

Can you catch HIV from sharing toilet facilities?

NO

Can you catch HIV from shaking hands?

NO

Can you catch HIV from coughs and sneezes?

NO

Is it dangerous for those with HIV to handle food or be in contact with the public in their job?

NO The virus is only passed on through infected blood, semen or vaginal fluids. If proper hygiene precautions are taken there is no danger in handling foodstuffs, or in carrying on with any other job. There should be no employment discrimination against those with HIV.

Is it dangerous for children with HIV to attend school?

NO There should be no danger in children attending school and participating in normal school activities. The Department of Education has produced detailed guidance for schools to follow to make sure there are no problems.

More Information ?

NUPE sends out circulars to branches with information on health and safety.

The following free leaflets are available:

'AIDS and the workplace: A guide for employers'

Employment Department/HSE.

From Dept. of Employment, Caxton House,
Tothill Street,
London SW1H 9NF.

'AIDS - What everyone needs to know'

Health Education Authority.

From Dept. A, P.O. Box 100,
Milton Keynes MK1 1TY.

'HIV - the Causative Agent of AIDS and Related Conditions'

Dept. of Health/HSE.

From Dept. of Health,
No. 2 site,
Heywood Stores,
Manchester Road, Heywood,
Lancs. OL10 2PZ.

'Children at school and problems related to AIDS'

Dept. of Education and Science,
Publications Despatch Centre,
Honeypot Lane,
Stanmore, Middx. HA7 1AZ

For further information and advice

National AIDS Helpline

0800 567123 (24 hours a day)
Free confidential advice.

Scottish AIDS Monitor

031 558 1167

AIDS Helpline, Northern Ireland

Belfast 249268

Cardiff AIDS Helpline

Cardiff 223443

Health Promotion Authority for Wales

8th Floor, Brunel House
2 Fitzalan Road
Cardiff CF2 1EB
Cardiff 472 472

Terrence Higgins Trust

BM/AIDS, London WC1N 3XX
071 242 1010

Offers help and counselling to people with HIV and AIDS, their relatives and friends. Also publishes leaflets about HIV and AIDS.

Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA)

1-4 Halton Place
London EC1N 8ND
071 430 2341

Provides advice on HIV/AIDS and drug abuse.

Haemophilia Society

071 928 2020

Advice for people with haemophilia who are HIV positive.

Positively Women

For women with a positive diagnosis
071 490 5515

Blackliners

071 738 5274

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

071 837 7324