

BLOOD-BORNE VIRUSES

Blood-borne viruses (BBVs) are viruses that are carried in the blood and bloodstream. They can also be carried in other body fluids like semen, vaginal fluids, breast milk, and lymph fluid. Depending on the virus, the person carrying it may have serious outward symptoms, or may show no symptoms at all. In many cases a person can be totally unaware the virus is present. It is possible to pass on the virus without even realising it. The most common BBVs are human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

HIV

HIV is a virus that specifically targets the immune system. Once it has infected a person, HIV uses the body's immune cells (also known as CD4 or T-cells) to produce more HIV. As the virus multiplies and spreads, it kills the immune cells, weakening the immune system and leaving a person vulnerable to certain illnesses and infections. When a person gets one of these illnesses, they are then said to have acquired immune deficiency syndrome (**AIDS**)

There is no vaccine or cure for HIV; however, HIV treatments known as anti-retroviral therapies (ART) can prevent HIV from multiplying in the body. The availability of anti-HIV medications in Australia means very few people will develop AIDS. In many older people living with HIV, the treatments are not always 100% effective, meaning they are still vulnerable to illness and infection.

HEPATITIS B

Hepatitis B (HBV) is a virus that affects the liver. HBV can be either acute or chronic. When it is acute, it can cause flu-like symptoms that last up to 6 months. Some people are asymptomatic, meaning they don't show symptoms at all; in most people, the virus goes away on its own. Regardless of whether they show symptoms, a person with acute HBV can pass the virus onto others. In some people, HBV doesn't go away. These people are said to have chronic HBV. This can lead to serious problems, including liver failure and liver cancer. (See *Factsheet 4: HIV and Cancer* for more information)

There is a vaccine for HBV, but because people are usually asymptomatic, they may not think they need to be tested or vaccinated. There are treatments available for HBV, but the longer a person has it, the less effective the treatments become. This is why standard precautions, regular testing, and vaccination are a good idea.

HEPATITIS C

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a virus that affects the liver, much like HBV. However, unlike HBV, most people with HCV develop a chronic infection. When a person contracts HCV they may not have any symptoms at all. If they do have symptoms, they usually resemble flu symptoms, including fatigue, fever, nausea, and vomiting. Usually these symptoms go away on their own; this does not mean the virus has gone away. A person with HCV can still pass it on, even if they have no symptoms. If left undiagnosed and untreated, HCV can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer.

There is no vaccine for HCV. There are new and more effective treatments now available that work for most people and are now available through the PBS.

RISK AND PREVENTION

All of these viruses (HIV, HBV, and HCV) are usually passed on through high-risk activities, like sexual intercourse without condoms, or sharing needles and injection equipment.

In an occupational setting, like a hospital or care facility, there is a very low risk of getting a blood-borne virus.

By using standard precautions, the risk of getting hepatitis or HIV is almost completely eliminated (for more information on standard precautions, please see *Factsheet 2: Prevention and Standard Precautions*).

CARE OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH A BLOOD-BORNE VIRUS

Care workers and health professionals come from diverse backgrounds, and may have beliefs and values different from their clients. However, whatever the situation or context, all workers have a special responsibility to ensure that people in their care are treated with respect and dignity. People with HIV or another BBV need to be able to trust that their health information will be kept private and confidential. It should be shared with others only with the person's consent, and only if it is necessary for their care.

Being sensitive to the feelings and potential fears of people with HIV is important to gain their trust and develop a working relationship. Understanding the impact of stigma can help you provide higher quality of care and support (for more information, please see *Factsheet 12: Disclosure, Privacy, and Confidentiality*).

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on HIV, see the Victorian AIDS Council website: <http://www.vac.org.au/hiv-fact-sheet>

For useful resources on viral hepatitis, see the Hepatitis Victoria website: <http://www.hepvic.org.au>