



Blood-borne virus information

What is a blood-borne virus?

A blood-borne virus (BBV) is an infection that is carried in your blood and attacks your body's functions.

Blood-borne viruses include:

- Hepatitis B
- Hepatitis C
- HIV, which causes AIDS

Catching a BBV is serious

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. It is usually caused by a virus infection. Hepatitis attacks the liver directly and can lead to serious illness, liver damage and in some cases death.

Most people recover from **hepatitis B** completely if they receive treatment. Some people will go on to become carriers of hepatitis B and develop long-term illness.

Some people with the **hepatitis C** never get serious liver problems and do not become infectious. There is also treatment available for Hepatitis C which is effective in many cases

However, some people who catch hepatitis C will slowly develop liver damage – possibly over a 20-year period, for some this will lead to severe illness and in some cases death.

HIV (Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus) is a virus that weakens a person's immune system. It is the virus that causes AIDS. A person can be infected with HIV and not know it. A person can be infected with HIV for many years (often more than 10 years) before they develop AIDS.

A person is said to have AIDS if they become HIV positive and other infections develop. People who develop AIDS are likely to suffer serious illness and in most cases death. Currently, there is no cure for AIDS. However, there are treatments that slow down the virus.

What to do if you are infected

If you are infected with a BBV you will need to get regular check-ups, doctors will want to keep an eye on you and make sure you receive the right treatment.

Your health can be best protected by not injecting at all. If you do inject, use clean needles, syringes, and filters, mixing utensils and water every time.

Avoid drinking alcohol during the course of a hepatitis illness.

Use a condom every time you have sex

If you are pregnant, it is important to tell your midwife as special treatment can be offered to protect your baby from hepatitis B when it is born.

How are blood-borne viruses spread?

- BBV's can live in even small amounts of blood and semen; even if you can't see any blood you can still be infected. Some BBV's can survive for days outside the body.
- BBV's can be caught or passed on by sharing injecting equipment, Never share needles, syringes, spoons or water cups or filters.
- Also never share snorting tubes and pipes.
- You can protect yourself from BBV's by using condoms every time you have vaginal or anal sex. The risk of catching a BBV through unprotected oral sex is thought to be much lower – but it is possible – it's best to use condoms for oral sex too.
- BBV's can also be caught or passed on by sharing toothbrushes and razors, or by un-sterile tattooing or piercing needles.
- BBV's may be passed on by mothers during pregnancy and childbirth.

How do I know if I have a BBV?

Many people do not have any symptoms but still be infected. You can still infect other people if you have no symptoms.

Other people may feel run-down or lose their appetite for a short period of time. The skin and eyes may have a yellow jaundice colour.

The only way to know for sure is to be tested – you can get tested at your local genitor-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic, by your GP, or at your drug treatment service.

How can I avoid getting a BBV?

People are most at risk from contracting a BBV if they have unprotected sex or choose to inject drugs.

- ❖ **ALWAYS use new injecting equipment** including; needles, water, glasses, spoons, and filters. Small amounts of blood are easily passed to other people while injecting so you should always have your own protected space and equipment. The best way to avoid the risk of BBV's is to stop injecting drugs altogether, your local drug treatment service can offer advice and support.
- ❖ **ALWAYS use a condom for vaginal, anal or oral sex.** Make sure you are using condoms properly; follow the instructions in the packet. Don't stop using condoms once you have been going out with someone for a while. The only safe time to stop using condoms is when both of you have been checked out at the GUM clinic and have given a clean-bill of health.

BBV's are not passed through normal social contact, for example, from a cup or by touching an infected person. However, it is sensible to follow basic hygiene steps to protect yourself from risk.

- ❖ **ALWAYS use your own drug using equipment.** This includes snorting tubes for cocaine and pipes used to smoke crack or cannabis.
- ❖ **ALWAYS** check if you get a tattoo or a piercing that the equipment used is sterile. Only wear your own earrings and body jewellery and never borrow your to anyone else.
- ❖ **ALWAYS use only your own razors.** And never let anyone else use yours. You can get small cuts when you shave. Some BBV's can then live on razors for many days. Store your razor away from anyone else's.
- ❖ **ALWAYS use only your own toothbrushes.** And never let anyone else use yours. Your gums may bleed (even a little bit) when you brush your teeth. Some BBV's can then live on toothbrushes for many days. Store your toothbrush away from anyone else's.
- ❖ **ALWAYS use your own** nail scissors, tweezers and nailbrush. These can all carry small specks of blood.

- ❖ **ALWAYS cover cuts and scratches with a plaster.** Scratches, cuts and wounds should be carefully cleaned and covered with a waterproof dressing or plaster.

Get vaccinated!

Hepatitis B can be vaccinated against, this is the safest way of protecting yourself against BBV's. Talk to your GP, GUM clinic or drug service.

There are no vaccinations available for Hepatitis C or HIV.

It is more dangerous to have more than one type of hepatitis or HIV at the same time. If you have hepatitis C, you should still get vaccinated against hepatitis B.

If you do get yourself vaccinated against hepatitis B you still need to use a condom every time you have sex and never share, lend or borrow any injecting equipment!

USEFUL NATIONAL NUMBERS

THE BRITISH LIVER TRUST

Information is the lifeblood of our work and we endeavour to inform, support and advise people who are concerned about or living with liver disease, to enable them to make informed decisions about their lives.

Telephone: 01425 463080 Fax: 01425 470706

British Liver Trust, Portman House, 44 High Street, Ringwood, BH24 1AG

Email: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk

AIDSMAP

Detailed **information** on the treatment of AIDS.

www.aidsmap.com

AVERT

www.avert.org/youngindx.htm

AVERT's site includes this special page for young people about HIV/AIDS and other issues around sex and relationships.

FRANK

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