

Bloodborne Pathogens: Exposure In The Workplace Employee Handbook

Introduction

There's a danger in the workplace that's not even visible to the naked eye, yet it could change your life forever if you're exposed to it. Do you know what it is?

If you said bloodborne pathogens, you are correct.

The purpose of Bloodborne Pathogens: Exposure In The Workplace training is to arm you with the information you need to protect yourself against exposure to these harmful microorganisms, and to know what to do in the event that exposure occurs.

What Are Bloodborne Pathogens?

Bloodborne pathogens are bacteria and viruses that live in blood and other body fluids. These pathogens can cause devastating diseases like hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) – diseases that can make you very sick and even be lethal. Some facts:

- Tens of thousands of new hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV cases are reported every year.
- A significant number of exposures occur in the workplace.
- Anytime – or anywhere – you come into contact with someone else's blood or body fluids you're at risk of a potential exposure.

To make matters worse, if you're infected with a bloodborne pathogen, you're the one whose blood and body fluids people have to worry about. And that puts your family, your friends and your entire quality of life in jeopardy.

How Are Bloodborne Pathogens Transferred And Spread?

Contrary to what some people think, sexual intercourse is not the only way bloodborne pathogens are spread. Bloodborne pathogens can live in:

- Blood;
- Semen;
- Vaginal fluids;
- Saliva, sweat, tears or vomit that's visibly contaminated with blood.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) calls body fluids that aren't blood "Other Potentially Infectious Materials," or OPIM.

If these fluids are contaminated and they touch your eyes, mouth or nose, or an open wound of any kind – even something as small as a hangnail or a paper cut – bloodborne pathogens can enter your system. Here are some common ways that infection might happen in a workplace situation:

- Aiding a bleeding co-worker;
- Cleaning up blood after an accident;
- Cleaning up tools and equipment following an accident;
- Handling objects that have been contaminated.

You simply can't predict whether people carry a bloodborne pathogen by the way they look or behave. Anyone can be a carrier, and you wouldn't know it. *They* might not even know it.

That's why you should treat *every* situation as through the person is a bloodborne pathogen carrier, no matter how well you know him or her, no matter how remotely the person fits the idea you have of someone who may be infected.

Who Should Protect Themselves?

Everyone should protect themselves against bloodborne pathogens exposures.

Many companies are required by OSHA to have trained first responders on site to help injured employees, along with medical supplies to treat the wounds. These are companies that are likely to have accidents that could result in severe injuries, or businesses that can't expect to get emergency care in a reasonable time frame.

OSHA also requires any person at your company who may come into contact with blood or OPIM as part of their job duties to be trained on bloodborne pathogens exposures at the beginning of their assignment, and to receive refresher training once a year after that. Employers are required to offer these individuals the hepatitis B vaccine series protection, and also to have an "Exposure Control Plan" that outlines the steps to take when blood or OPEM are likely to be present.

The thing is, you may not be someone house job actually involves contact with blood or body fluids. You may think you have no reason to sorry. But, even in the safest of settings, anyone can get injured on the job, and it's human nature to want to come to their aid.

So, no matter what your job is, you need to be aware of how hazardous bloodborne pathogens are and know how to protect yourself.

How To Protect Yourself

Just like when you learn in CPR training to call 911 before you attempt to resuscitate a victim, your first step in helping an injured co-worker should be to call your company's emergency number.

You might think you don't have time to contact anyone before you act, but if your company has designated first responders, they're the ones with the training and equipment to help; and if the incident is serious, you want them there as fast as possible. Be sure you know where phones are located and what number to call in the event of an emergency.

Universal Precautions

Whether you're a designated first responder or not, you need to protect yourself. Precautions only take an extra moment, and they can save a lot of anxiety and anguish down the road.

There are several safety measures, called "Universal Precautions," that every responder should take when there's a potential for exposure to bloodborne pathogens:

1. Get proper training.

If you're exposed to bloodborne pathogens as part of your job, your employer is required by OSHA to provide you with training.

That includes first responders, naturally, but it also includes people like on-site nurses, plus custodians who might have to clean up after an injury, or who may be exposed to needles, blood or body fluids during a normal workday.

2. Treat all blood and OPIM as contaminated.

As for whose blood or body fluids you should worry about... don't even try to guess. Anybody could be a carrier, and you don't want to find out about it *after* you've been exposed.

3. Use proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

All employers – including yours – are required to make proper PPE readily accessible to you and your co-workers where exposure risks occur. That includes:

- Gloves;
- Face masks;
- Goggles;
- Gowns.

Know where these items are stored, and know how to properly wear them. That includes making sure gowns are tied in back to prevent strings from dangling in contaminated materials.

Use Gloves Properly

Disposable gloves are the most commonly used protective item for obvious reasons – your hands are the most likely part of your body to come in contact with another person's blood or body fluids. Some people are allergic to traditional latex gloves, so your employer must provide hypoallergenic or powderless gloves as an option.

Some techniques for using gloves include:

- **Before you put gloves on, check to make sure they're 100 percent intact.** They can break down if exposed to temperature extremes, and then they won't help anybody.
- **Remove disposable gloves as soon as possible** after they're contaminated, or if they become torn or punctured.
- **When you remove gloves, use caution.** Peel off the first glove and hold it in your still-gloved hand. Then, with your uncovered fingers, peel off the remaining glove from the inside, being careful not to touch the glove's exterior.
- **Always wash your hands immediately after removing gloves,** or use antiseptic cleansers and wash at the first opportunity.
- **Discard gloves and other protective gear in properly labeled containers.** Never reuse them.

The same precaution should be taken when removing other protective gear, which may require you to put on a fresh pair of gloves to finish the job.

4. Learn and heed special labels and signs.

Just as important as wearing protective gear is to learn and heed special labels and signs.

You're probably familiar with the universal biohazard symbol. *When you see it, take it seriously!*



If an area or item is marked with this symbol, it means that blood or other potentially infectious materials – OPIM – are present.

For example, if blood has been splattered to areas that can't be cleaned without special expertise – like inside a machine – your employer is required to mark the area with a biohazard label until cleaning and disinfecting is completed.

If you're the person who has to service a machine that's been contaminated with blood, you need to know about it *before* you begin the job.

Keep in mind: the hepatitis B virus can live up to seven days in dried blood!

So wherever you encounter the biohazard symbol, make sure you take the proper precautions to protect yourself.

5. Follow protective work practices.

Everyone should follow protective work practices designed to eliminate the possibility of cuts or punctures in the first place.

- Never pick up broken glass, metal shavings or other “sharps” by hand – use a broom and dustpan instead.
- Don’t bend or break used blades.
- Don’t recap needles.
- Dispose of used blades or sharp items in puncture-resistant containers.
- Dispose of large sharp objects in barrels or other strong receptacles, and always wear heavy-duty, cut-resistant gloves when you do.

There are also protective work practices that minimize the chance of spreading infection and exposing others. For instance, in areas where biohazard materials are used, stored or present in any way, you should avoid these activities:

- Eating;
- Drinking;
- Applying cosmetics;
- Handling contact lenses; or
- Storing food or beverages.

The point is, keep your distance from biohazard materials whenever practical.

6. Take advantage of the hepatitis B vaccine if it’s offered.

As many as 1 in 20 individuals are infected with the hepatitis B virus at some point in their lives; so of the known diseases that result from exposure to bloodborne pathogens, this one is the most prevalent.

The bad news about hepatitis B: It can be lethal if it’s not treated. The good news: you can get vaccinated against it, whereas there’s no such vaccine for hepatitis C or HIV.

Employers are required to offer the hepatitis B vaccine to all employees whose jobs expose them to blood or OPIM, and it has to be offered within the first 10 days of the assignment. That doesn’t mean these employees have to get the vaccine. They can choose not to, and sign a form saying they declined it.

If the at-risk employee who declined the vaccine is exposed down the line, though, the employer must offer the vaccine to him or her again.

No vaccine is foolproof, but the hepatitis B vaccine will dramatically improve your chances of avoiding a potentially deadly disease.

Remember, there’s no vaccine available for HIV, hepatitis C and other diseases caused by bloodborne pathogens... so wearing protective gear and following safe work practices is still absolutely critical, even if you’ve been vaccinated.

Good Samaritan Acts

Your employer isn’t required to offer the hepatitis B vaccine to workers who perform “Good Samaritan Acts.” In other words, if you help someone – but it isn’t part of your job duties – and you have an exposure, your employer doesn’t have to offer you the vaccine.

The vaccine should be offered, though, because OSHA strongly recommends that all exposed employees be vaccinated within 24 hours of an incident – that’s when the vaccine is most effective.

If your employer doesn’t offer the hepatitis B vaccine to you, seek it on your own from your doctor or local clinic.

What To Do If An Exposure Occurs

An exposure occurs when you come into contact with blood, other body fluids or tissue that enters your system through the:

- Eyes;
- Mouth;
- Nasal membrane;
- Non-intact skin;
- Pierced skin.

If exposure happens, take these OSHA-recommended steps:

1. Immediately flood the exposed area with water;
2. Clean any wound with soap and water, or a skin disinfectant, if available;
3. Report the incident to your supervisor; and
4. Seek immediate medical attention.

If your clothing is exposed to spatter from someone else’s blood or body fluids:

- Remove the item at work and immediately dispose of it in a biohazard receptacle.
- Do NOT attempt to clean contaminated clothing in any area where other people might get exposed, such as the employee restroom.
- Do NOT take contaminated clothing home to wash it, or you put your family at risk.

Exposure Control Plan

Your company’s Exposure Control Plan contains the names of people to contact and methods of reporting an exposure, which will be shared with you as part of bloodborne pathogens training. If an exposure occurs, access this plan and follow the steps outlined.

Report Exposures

It’s critical to report an exposure immediately, because you need to get the hepatitis B vaccine within 24 hours for it to be most effective.

Another key reason to report it; it could take months or even years for a disease to develop, and if a disease does develop, both you and your employer will want to make sure there’s a record of how when the exposure occurred.

How To Clean And Decontaminate An Area

After an incident involving blood or OPIM, people may enter a potentially contaminated area without realizing the danger it poses. However, as long as there’s blood or OPIM present, or if the blood or OPIM has been removed but the area hasn’t been disinfected, bloodborne pathogens could still be present.

That’s why only a person trained in the bloodborne pathogen hazards should be allowed into the area, and it should be decontaminated as soon as possible.

Your employer’s Exposure Control plan outlines the decontamination method you should use, but here’s a typical sequence:

1. **Prepare for clean-up** the same way you would prepare for helping an injured person – put on gloves, and as needed, a face mask, goggles and maybe a gown.
2. **Tape off the area**, so other employees know to avoid it.
3. **Don't mop up blood or OPIM or attempt to wipe it up** – You'll risk splashing and spreading it around. Instead, first use an absorbent, then collect the material with a broom and dustpan and deposit it in a designated biohazard bag or receptacle.
4. **Once the blood or OPIM is removed, decontaminate the area** using a disinfectant capable of destroying bloodborne pathogens: either an EPA-approved disinfectant or a fresh mix of one part household bleach to 10 parts water.
5. **Disinfect items that have been exposed to blood or body fluids** in a sink dedicated to industrial use – never use a break room or bathroom sink.
6. **Clean and disinfect the sink.**
7. **Properly remove and dispose of your protective gear.**

Protect The Next Person

Dealing correctly with bloodborne pathogens doesn't just mean protecting yourself... it also means protecting the next person from exposure.

Any areas that couldn't be cleaned right away – like cardboard boxes that could contain microscopic droplets of blood or areas inside a machine part – need to be appropriately labeled.

How To Dispose Of Biohazard Materials

Dispose of any sharp objects that have been contaminated with blood or OPIM, like needles, glass or blades, in appropriate "sharps" containers.

If the sharp object hasn't been exposed to blood or body fluids, it should be wrapped up and disposed of in a way that prevents someone else from being injured.

Also remember to properly dispose of the protective gear you're wearing – don't just throw it in the trash' use appropriate biohazard bags or receptacles.

What Happens After An Exposure?

After a potential exposure to blood or OPIM, your employer must provide immediate, confidential medical evaluations for those involved to determine their levels of risk.

That's true for all employees who were exposed during the incident, including the injured person, first responders and clean-up personnel.

The medical evaluation has to document how the exposure occurred and include the identity and test results of the person whose blood was contacted, if feasible. If the exposed person consents, his or her blood will be tested, and if needed, counseling can be provided.

Employee Rights To Examine Training And Medical Records

If you're an employee who's been exposed to blood or OPIM, your employer must keep your medical records for the duration of your employment, *plus 30 years*.

Why should you care? Because if you develop a bloodborne disease years later, you can go back and check your employment records for documentation of the exposure.

You have a right to examine your medical records at any time, but they can only be released to other parties with your consent, or if required by law.

Conclusion

It's an unfortunate fact that exposure to bloodborne pathogens can happen to anyone, at any time. But there's no need to turn an accident into a life sentence of worry and illness.

Protect yourself. Protect your co-workers. And, protect your family, friends and quality of life. Know and follow the precautions every person should take when there's a potential for exposure to bloodborne pathogens:

- Treat all blood and OPIM as if it's contaminated;
- Use proper personal protective equipment;
- Learn and heed special labels and signs;
- Follow protective work practices;
- Take advantage of the hepatitis B vaccine; and
- Follow appropriate cleanup, disposal and labeling procedures.

The key is: when there's a potential for exposure to bloodborne pathogens in the workplace, *prepare before you act*.

Your life and the lives of those closest to you, may depend on it.