

Managing bloodborne pathogens

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An employee is working on adjusting a damper on the Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning System when, unexpectedly, they draw their hand across the edge of the ductwork and cut themselves badly. An employee receives a needle-stick from a used insulin syringe while emptying the trash. A retail employee sticks their finger with the tagging gun when placing tags on clothing.

All of these incidents involve potential exposure to bloodborne pathogen hazards. Blood or other body fluids left behind from these types of incidents present a substantial danger to employees.

Potentially dangerous? That's right, this type of situation is potentially dangerous because nobody is immune to the effects of bloodborne pathogens. Hepatitis B or C and the HIV viruses may be present in these potentially dangerous materials. It is well known that contact with blood or other body fluids may cause transmission of these viruses and result in potentially life-threatening diseases. Fortunately, there are methods of protection against bloodborne pathogens which reduce or eliminate the risk of disease transmission.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has established a regulation governing employee exposures to bloodborne pathogens. This regulation details many of the means and methods necessary to prevent disease transmission from exposure to bloodborne pathogens. The first method is the use of "universal precautions." Universal precautions is a concept of treating all blood or other body fluids as if known to be infectious. In the examples offered, any blood or materials contaminated with blood would be treated as infectious.

The next means of protection is the use of work practice controls. All handling of blood or contaminated materials should be done in ways which minimize splattering or otherwise making it airborne. A simple and effective solution is the use of a powder "solidifying" agent to solidify and disinfect the materials. These agents are effective in killing pathogenic organisms which decreases the risk of disease transmission.

Finally, all cleanup and decontamination of blood or body fluids should be done using personnel protective equipment (PPE). PPE in this case includes a minimum of latex gloves. Face shields or goggles and masks may be necessary if there

is the possibility of splashing or otherwise making the contaminated material airborne. Again, the use of a solidifying agent helps. All surfaces which may have been contaminated with bloodborne pathogens should be thoroughly disinfected. This can be done with commercial disinfectants or a simple solution of 10% bleach in water.

Anyone who may be exposed to bloodborne pathogens may get a prophylactic Hepatitis B vaccination. Your employer is required to provide for these vaccinations. Anyone who believes that they may have been exposed to a bloodborne pathogen should seek medical attention.

Finally, employers should have a comprehensive written program detailing methods of complying with the OSHA regulations and preventing disease transmission through exposure to bloodborne pathogens. A major component of this program will be training of employees in proper techniques and preventive measures to reduce the likelihood of disease transmission.

*Originally published March 2000.
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