Risks of exposure to blood borne viruses at home and on holiday

Information for patients
This leaflet has been written to tell you about the risks of blood borne viruses. This information is important, because you have chronic kidney disease and may be starting dialysis in the future.

If you are dependant on dialysis to treat kidney failure you may be exposed to blood and other bodily fluids during your treatment. This increases the risk of being infected by a blood borne virus. If you also travel abroad and have dialysis, you may be more at risk of picking up these viruses.

In addition, if you have chronic kidney disease you are more prone to infection.

**What are blood borne viruses?**

Blood borne viruses include the hepatitis B virus, hepatitis C virus and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). These can cause serious illnesses, such as liver disease or AIDS. They can also stay in the body for a long time without causing symptoms. They are usually passed from one person to another by contact with body fluids, especially blood.
How could I have been exposed to a blood borne virus?

This could have been:

- by having sex with an infected person without using a condom
- by receiving a blood product transfusion of infected blood (this is very unlikely in the UK, as blood products are screened for these viruses)
- by sharing needles or syringes if using intravenous drugs
- receiving injected drugs or blood from needles which have not been properly sterilised (in the UK all needles used in hospitals are sterilised properly and are safe)
- from having tattoos or body piercing in an unsterile environment.

The chance of infection is higher in countries where these viruses are more common, such as Africa, Asia or the Far East.

What routine testing is done?

Your kidney or transplant doctor or nurse will organise for you to have a blood test before you start dialysis. Your blood will be tested for HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. This is known as a blood borne virus test.

Once you start haemodialysis your blood will be tested on a regular basis. Your blood can be collected while you are on the machine. Your dialysis nurse will let you know when these tests are done and what your results are. Blood borne virus tests are also required before we discuss the option of a kidney transplant.

When you travel to another dialysis unit you will need to have the virus test taken before you go and when you return. The risk of exposure to a virus in a UK dialysis unit is very low, but the risk is higher if you have dialysis treatment abroad.
What happens if I don’t want to have the tests?

We will only do the tests if you agree. You would still have the dialysis treatment you need.

As we have to protect everyone from virus infection, if you do not want to have the test we would then assume that you could possibly carry a virus. Your treatment would need to be separate from other patients, in a single room. Other dialysis units (such as on holiday) will not accept you for dialysis. You would also not be able to receive a kidney transplant.

What would happen if the tests were positive for a virus?

For most people the chance of a positive test is very low. However, if you do have a positive result you would still receive the dialysis treatment you need. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist for treatment of the virus. You would need to have dialysis in a single room, to reduce the chance of you passing the virus to other patients on dialysis.

Why does this matter to people with kidney failure?

In the past, spread of blood borne viruses has been a problem in dialysis units, but this is now rare in the UK because of the precautions that we take.
How is the risk of infection reduced?

- Everyone who might need dialysis treatment should be vaccinated to prevent hepatitis B infection. This is part of Government guidance. Your pre-dialysis or dialysis team can organise this for you through your GP.

- After being used, all dialysis machines are disinfected internally using bleach and heat to kill viruses. The outside of the machines, beds and other equipment are also cleaned thoroughly between each person.

- The use of hand gel by clinicians between each patient has also reduced the risk of infection. The dialysis nurses will also wear protective clothing, such as gloves, aprons and eye protection.

Information for using haemodialysis facilities abroad

Before you go on holiday, your dialysis nurse will retest your blood for viruses. They will need to tell the unit you are visiting the results.
What happens when I return home from holiday?

Your nurse will talk to you about your holiday and the risk of catching a blood borne virus.

Depending on the level of risk, you may need dialysis in a single room or a double room. As the number of single and double rooms is limited on the units, we may need to change your dialysis appointment time. Your dialysis nurse will talk to you about this.

Your nurse will send a sample of your blood to the lab so it can be tested for all the blood borne viruses. The result takes about a week to be completed. Your dialysis nurse will let you know the result. Your blood will be tested once a month for the next 3 months.

Where can I find more information?

Your doctor or nurse will answer any questions you may have.

There is also information available from the Department of Health:

The NHS choices website has helpful information on hepatitis B:
Website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/hepatitis-b/Pages/Introduction.aspx
If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call 01865 221 473 or email PALS@ouh.nhs.uk

Authors: Jayne Woodhouse, Deputy Matron
Margaret Townsend, Wycombe Renal Unit Manager
Reviewed by Renal Patient Information Group, June 2016
October 2016
Review: October 2019
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information