

# Injecting + infections

What you need to know





## **If you inject, please read this booklet.**

You have been given this booklet because we want to reduce the number of injecting drug users who get HIV and hepatitis B and C.

**Cutting down or stopping injecting is the best way to protect yourself from infection and injury, and getting into treatment is one of the best things you can do to help cut down the amount you inject.**

You can protect yourself (and others) from serious infections if you:

**1 Use new sterile injecting equipment every time, and never share:**

- needles and syringes;
- spoons or cookers;
- water;
- filters; or
- acids.

**2 Clean any injecting equipment you re-use with thin bleach.**



**3 Create a 'safe space' for preparing your hit.**

You can do this by getting it together on a surface that you can throw away afterwards (like a newspaper or magazine).

**4 Always dispose of used injecting equipment safely.**

Use a sharps bin to store used equipment until you can take it back to the needle exchange.

## Infections

There are two main types of infection that can get into your body when you inject drugs – bacteria and viruses.

**Bacteria** live on the skin and all other surfaces.

**ON**

**Viruses** live in cells and can be carried in blood.

**IN**

## **Bacteria**

**To reduce the risk of infection – always wash your hands and the injecting site with soap and water before you start.**

If you inject drugs you will always inject some bacteria as well.

Your immune system will usually find the bacteria and kill them. But sometimes they will cause an infection.

This is usually because it is a powerful infection or you have injected a lot of bacteria or your body can't fight off the infection because you are unwell or your circulation isn't very good.

If you are prone to infections then take extra care washing your hands and keep your injecting sites clean.

## Viruses

**Viruses are tiny** – if a single virus was blown up to be the size of a marble, a syringe at the same scale would be 75 miles high.



Because viruses live and reproduce in cells, it is hard to kill them without killing the body cells at the same time. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses – so you've got to avoid catching them.

There are three different viruses that can be passed on to others in blood that injectors need to know about – hepatitis B, hepatitis C and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).



Hepatitis B and hepatitis C attack your liver. HIV attacks your immune system and can cause AIDS.

Following the injecting advice at the beginning of this booklet will help to protect you and others from all three viruses.

It only takes a tiny amount of blood to get into another person's bloodstream for the viruses to be passed on.

**There can be thousands of virus particles in a drop of blood that is too small to see.**

Sharing any material or objects that could have come into contact with blood might lead to infection.



**HIV**



HIV is a virus that lives in blood. It can be passed on by sharing injecting equipment and having unprotected sex. There is no vaccination that can protect you against HIV.

Needle and syringe exchange has been available in the UK since shortly after the discovery of HIV.

Because of this, there are very low levels of HIV among injectors in the UK. But this could easily change...

**To keep the number of HIV infections low, injectors in the UK need to avoid sharing works and other injecting equipment, and to practise safer sex.**

In other countries, where getting hold of sterile works is much more difficult, HIV rates have grown much higher and so many more injectors have died of AIDS.

## **Testing**

The only way to tell if someone has HIV is by blood tests.

The HIV test looks for antibodies – the substances your body makes to fight the virus.

If there are HIV antibodies in your blood, it means you are infected with the virus.

## **The disease**

The HIV virus can cause AIDS, which stands for acquired immune-deficiency syndrome.

Without treatment, the virus destroys the immune system, leaving you open to a wide range of infections that a healthy body would be able to fight off easily.

## **Treatment**

HIV treatment has become much more successful at treating infections.

Early diagnosis makes it possible for you to get the right treatments at the right time.

hep c

Hepatitis C (hep C) can cause serious liver disease. It is passed on through sharing injecting equipment.

There are two reasons injectors are much more likely to catch hep C than HIV:

- far more injectors have it; and
- it is more infectious.

People in sexual relationships sometimes think: “We’re having unprotected sex, so it doesn’t make any difference if we share works.”

**It does!**

Hep C is rarely transmitted through sex but it is easily transmitted through sharing injecting equipment.

The only way to tell if you have hep C is by blood tests. The first test is for antibodies, the second test looks for the virus itself.

**It is very important that all injecting drug users have regular tests for hepatitis C.**

### **Testing**

Sometimes people test positive for the antibody, but negative for the virus. This means that the virus has been in the bloodstream but has now gone.

This doesn't mean that they are immune, and sharing in the future can easily result in hep C infection.



Hep C is not a disease that causes problems straight away, but it can creep up on you and make you really ill.

Liver damage can be slow to develop, so few people are aware of anything for the first few years.

**The symptoms of liver disease can include:**

- chronic tiredness;
- anxiety;
- feeling sick;
- a poor appetite;
- weight loss;
- feeling ill after drinking alcohol;
- pale stools and dark urine;
- skin and eyeballs turning yellow (jaundice);
- aching pain and tenderness below the ribs on the right side;
- joint pains and muscle pain;
- poor concentration: and
- depression and anxiety.

One of the hard things for people with hep C is that it can be difficult to know if the virus is making them ill as all of these symptoms can be caused by other problems too.

**You are much more likely to get ill if you drink alcohol.**

Liver disease is much worse for people who drink alcohol heavily (even if only occasionally).

Drinking heavily, especially over a long period of time, greatly increases the risk of serious liver disease.

## **Treatment**

Treatment for hep C is often effective in getting rid of the virus, and is becoming more widely available. It involves giving people injections of a drug called interferon, combined with other drugs that are effective against the virus.

Hep C treatment works.

hep  B

Hepatitis B is present in blood. It can be passed on very easily (to people who haven't been vaccinated) through sharing injecting equipment and having unprotected sex.

### **The disease**

People who catch the hepatitis B virus and experience the infection can have a few very unpleasant weeks or months of illness with symptoms including extreme tiredness, loss of appetite, being unable to tolerate alcohol and sometimes yellowing of the skin, known as jaundice.

The body then usually (but not always) gets rid of the virus without treatment.

### **Treatment**

For those people who develop long-term hepatitis B infection, the blood tests and treatment are similar to those for hepatitis C.

**Get vaccinated!** There is a vaccination against hepatitis B. All drug users and their close families should have it.

If you have been vaccinated, you can't catch hepatitis B (but you could still catch hepatitis C or HIV).

If you have not already been offered the hepatitis B vaccination, your needle

exchange, drug treatment service or GP should be able to arrange it for you.

It usually takes three jabs in your arm over a few weeks or months.

**You must have the full course of vaccinations,**  
and then have a blood test to make sure it has  
worked – then it's one less virus to worry about!



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