



Information for healthcare workers living with a blood borne virus who perform exposure prone procedures

The new *Australian national guidelines for the management of healthcare workers living with blood borne viruses and healthcare workers who perform exposure prone procedures at risk of exposure to blood borne viruses* (the Guidelines) have been updated and reflect the effectiveness of antiviral treatment for the following blood borne viruses – hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV. The new Guidelines allow healthcare workers living with a blood borne virus (BBV) to perform exposure prone procedures (EPPs), provided they comply with the Guidelines.

The Guidelines also support timely testing and treatment of healthcare workers. All healthcare workers who are performing EPPs are required to take reasonable steps to know their BBV status and should be tested for BBVs at least once every three years, and are required to have appropriate and timely testing after potential BBV exposures.

Why do we have these Guidelines?

There is a very low risk of transmission from a healthcare worker with a BBV to a patient during the performance of EPPs, even with best practice infection prevention and control. Due to the nature of EPPs, healthcare workers who perform these procedures are at a higher risk of acquiring a BBV from a patient and, rarely, also of transmitting a BBV to a patient. The purpose of the Guidelines is to mitigate the risk of transmission of a BBV from a healthcare worker to a patient.

The Guidelines have been updated to reflect current medical evidence around the effectiveness of antiviral treatment for hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV. Worldwide, since widespread availability of antiviral medication, there has not been a published case of transmission of a BBV from an effectively treated healthcare worker to a patient.

A broad range of health professional groups were consulted and provided feedback during the development of the Guidelines.

What will I have to do to comply with these Guidelines?

Healthcare workers living with a BBV who are performing EPPs are expected to:

- be under the ongoing care of a treating doctor with relevant expertise
- comply with prescribed treatment
- have ongoing viral load monitoring at the appointed times
- not perform EPPs if particular viral load or viral clearance criteria are not met (see detailed information in the Guidelines according to the specific BBV)
- seek advice regarding any change in health condition that may affect their fitness to practise or impair their health
- release monitoring information to the treating doctor
- if required, release de-identified information to the relevant area of the jurisdictional health department/Expert Advisory Committee
- if required, release health monitoring information to a designated person in their workplace in the event of a potential exposure incident to assess the requirement for further public health action

Additional details can be found in the [Guidelines](#).

What are exposure prone procedures (EPPs)?

EPPs are procedures where there is a risk of injury to the healthcare worker resulting in exposure of the patient's open tissues to the blood of the healthcare worker.

These procedures include those where the healthcare worker's hands even when gloved, may be in contact with sharp instruments, needle tips or sharp tissues (spicules of bone or teeth) inside a patient's open body cavity, wound or confined anatomical space where the hands or fingertips may not be completely visible at all times.

Non-exposure prone procedures are procedures where the hands and fingers of the healthcare worker are visible and outside of the body at all times and procedures or internal examinations that do not involve possible injury to the healthcare worker's hands by sharp instruments and/or tissues, provided routine infection prevention and control procedures are followed.

More information on which procedures are exposure prone can be found in the [Guidance on classification of exposure prone and non-exposure prone procedures in Australia 2017](#).

The relevant specialist college for your profession can provide further advice and guidance on which procedures in your particular specialty constitute EPPs.

What if I don't perform EPPs?

The Guidelines do not apply to a healthcare worker living with a BBV who does not perform EPPs.

When will the Guidelines apply?

The updated Guidelines apply now. Health practitioner Boards who register practitioners who may perform EPPs are developing their own guidelines to support implementation of these Guidelines.

Does this mean I can go back to performing EPPs after previously being excluded?

Healthcare workers who are currently restricted or become restricted from performing EPPs may again be eligible to perform EPPs provided they meet the criteria outlined in the Guidelines and obtain clearance from their treating doctor with relevant expertise in accordance with the Guidelines.

Healthcare workers will also need to meet relevant requirements for registration with their specialist medical college, including recency of practice and any restrictions to practice that are in place. ([AHPRA](#))

Retraining and supervision for healthcare workers returning to EPPs may be considered on a case by case basis as recommended by their specialist college.

How do I obtain initial health clearance to perform EPPs?

Your treating doctor with the relevant expertise, is able to grant initial health clearance to perform EPPs in accordance with the criteria set out in the Guidelines for the relevant BBV.

What if I have taken a career break from performing EPPs?

Healthcare workers with a BBV who take a career break from performing EPPs may wish to continue monitoring during this time in order to facilitate a return to EPP activities. Individuals with a break in their monitoring record must meet the relevant criteria for initial clearance before returning to EPP activities.

What if I am unable to obtain clearance to perform EPPs or disagree with the refusal of clearance from my treating doctor?

Complex situations or disagreements can be referred to the relevant area of the jurisdictional health department by either the treating doctor or the healthcare worker living with a BBV. A pathway to consider these situations is in place for each jurisdiction.

Do I need to tell my workplace of my blood borne virus status?

Healthcare workers have the same right to access confidential testing, counselling and treatment as the general population.

Employers of healthcare workers must consider the relevant public health, antidiscrimination, privacy, industrial relations and equal employment opportunity legislation in their jurisdiction.

Depending upon your jurisdiction and/or employment arrangements you may need to provide evidence of clearance from your treating doctor.

The protection of public health may require that health monitoring information (including viral load and relevant clinical information) may need to be released to a designated person in your workplace in the event of a potential exposure incident to assess the requirement for further public health action.

What if I have a workplace exposure?

If an occupational exposure occurs where a patient is accidentally exposed to the blood of a healthcare worker living with a BBV, the incident should be reported to the appropriate person according to local protocols.

The relevant person, which may include local public health authorities, will evaluate the significance of the exposure and determine the follow-up required. Health monitoring information (including viral load and relevant clinical information) may need to be released to a designated person in your workplace to assess the requirement for further public health action.

What happens if I do not comply with these Guidelines?

A healthcare worker performing EPPs who does not comply with the Guidelines can be notified to AHPRA, to the relevant Board and to the public health authorities in the relevant jurisdiction.

Where can I get more information?

Additional information can be found in the [Guidelines and other supporting material](#).

Support and advice for healthcare workers living with a BBV is available from your specialist college or from the [Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine](#).