



IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO A BODY FLUID EXPOSURE

Definition - A body fluid exposure in the healthcare context involves transfer of a body fluid from one person - the source (usually a patient) to another - the exposed (usually a staff member). The exposure may be a penetrative injury from a sharp item e.g. needle, blade etc or a splash to eyes, mucous membranes (both intact or non intact) or to non intact skin e.g. damaged, eczema, dermatitis, abrasion.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

Note: it is mandatory for staff to report any sharps injury immediately (usually to manager)

The management of an exposure is treated as a medical emergency because prompt treatment may be potentially life-saving - prompt reporting and assessment is critical. Post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for HIV, if advised, is best given within a few hours post exposure and certainly that day. It is not dependent on waiting for blood test results and providing it at 72 hours may not be optimal. Exposed staff must be supported in following the protocol that sets out the immediate response - managers must be prepared to send the exposed staff to casualty and GPs need to be prepared to do a source assessment without delay. All staff must know the 3 immediate steps to take and should know what to do if the GPs or manager are not present to assess a source. The protocols attached to this topic are guides only.

The injured site e.g. needlestick or human bite is not squeezed but is washed immediately - warm soapy water preferred but cold water is satisfactory. Variations include applying some pressure to washing. A cut from a scalpel blade may need suturing - first aid is required in this instance. Use of a disinfectant is not recommended - its preventative effect is difficult to assess and it may delay healing. The exposure requires prompt assessment by a qualified person to determine if prophylaxis is advised.

A splash from body fluid to the eyes or mucous membranes including the mouth is an exposure - flush gently with copious amounts of water / saline.

Three steps of immediate response

- Wash the site
- Stop work and report exposure (the source will need an assessment for risk)
- Seek access to expert assessment of exposure where further details may be sought

NEXT MONTH – A SUGGESTED PROTOCOL FOR ENABLING PROMPT ASSESSMENT