

1. OBJECTIVE

Guidance material to support HR - HSW-PR35 Occupational Health and Hygiene, particularly for communicable Diseases

2. PROCEDURE

2.1. Spread of Communicable Diseases

A communicable disease can vary in severity from the common cold to diseases that can be life threatening and which may cause death or a debilitating illness that may involve hospital treatment and prevent staff attending work and students attending class for several days or more.

Groups who may be at specific risk at RMIT include cleaners, plumbing and waste disposal workers, first aid officers, and those who work in biological laboratory or field environments, and staff using syringes as part of their work requirements where there is a potential for needlestick injury.

Communicable diseases may be spread in the following ways:

- Airborne infection (droplet infection) - When an infected person speaks, coughs or sneezes, minute droplets containing agents escape into the air, which may then be inhaled (breathed in) by another person e.g. colds, influenza
- Direct physical contact - When contact, with a person who is infected occurs via mucous membranes or wounds in the skin. Body fluid discharges (i.e. blood, saliva, urine, faeces) of infected persons may carry disease-producing agents
- Contact with animals – After touching animals, enclosures or equipment and transferring infection to the mouth by eating, drinking or smoking with soiled hands
- Indirect contact – From touching contaminated surfaces, such as; hand towels, telephones, keyboards, etc.
- Contaminated food or water – Eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water, or swimming or cleaning in contaminated water can lead to the spread of infection including gastroenteritis
- Soil and sand – Contact with sand or soil which can contain microorganisms may cause infection
- Puncture wounds – When the skin is punctured by a sharp infected object such as a hypodermic needle, tattoo and piercing equipment, razor, etc., where the implement has been contaminated with body fluids from an infected person
- Waste – Contact with contaminated waste products.

A staff member, student or contractor who contracts a communicable disease has a duty to take reasonable care for the health and safety of other employees and other persons at their workplace by following the prevention of spread of disease instructions below, taking leave appropriately when unwell.

2.2. Exposure to Communicable Disease

The hazards associated with exposure to communicable disease through potential contact with human blood and other body fluids through needlestick injury and/or transmission of blood borne pathogens include Hepatitis B and C & HIV/AIDS and STIs.

Transmission of HIV requires direct infusion of infected blood or other bodily fluids into another's bloodstream. The only body fluids that have been implicated in transmission of HIV are semen, blood, vaginal secretions and in special circumstances, breast milk. There is no evidence of transmission via saliva and tears. HIV is transmitted sexually (mainly via anal or vaginal intercourse), via blood to blood contact (sharing needles and syringes by intravenous drug users) and from an infected woman to her infant via the placenta or breast milk.

Hepatitis can be caused by drinking alcohol in large quantities or taking drugs or medication. It can also be caused by certain viruses. Some forms of Hepatitis can be spread by contaminated water and through person to person transmission via the faecal-oral route or following exposure of open cuts or mucous membranes to infected blood or body fluids. The most common way people can get hepatitis C in Australia is by sharing drug-injecting equipment such as needles, syringes and spoons.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites and are passed person to person during unprotected sexual contact. They can infect many different parts of the body and often have no obvious symptoms.

2.3. Preventing the Spread of Infectious Diseases

2.3.1. *Standard personal hygiene*

The following instructions are the responsibility of each individual; they promote health and limit the spread of infectious diseases:

- Wash hands periodically during the day and immediately after using the toilet, use soap and water and lather up for at least 20 seconds; dry thoroughly
- Use a disinfectant wipe or sanitiser gel where washing facilities are not available
- Always cough into a tissue and dispose of tissues quickly
- Use soap and water or sanitising wipes to keep surfaces such as door handles, work bench tops, phones, and keyboards etc. clean
- Any cuts, abrasions or wounds including weeping eczema should be covered with an impermeable dressing, e.g. Band-Aid

2.3.2. *Blood borne pathogens*

Good hygiene practices, particularly washing and drying hands after contact, the use of protective gloves, appropriate handling and disposal of sharps and other contaminated or clinical (infectious) waste, and use of aseptic techniques (cleaning of wounds).

The process “Biological Safety” and guidance material “Sharps Incidents and Blood Borne Pathogens” provides technical guidance to all personnel who work in a biological laboratory and who actively handle or manage blood borne pathogens, as well as other laboratory material.

2.3.3. *Vaccine preventable diseases*

Vaccination against a range of bacterial and viral diseases is an integral part of communicable disease control world-wide. Vaccination against a specific disease not only reduces the incidence of that disease, it reduces the social and economic burden of the disease on communities. RMIT offers all staff the opportunity to receive free influenza vaccinations annually.