

Infection Control Basics

People who work in healthcare want to help sick people get better. But healthcare workers have another goal too. They want to keep sick people from making other people around them sick.

Controlling infectious diseases is an important goal of healthcare. Sometimes home health aides forget to take the necessary steps to keep disease from spreading. Some of these steps are inconvenient and irritating. They may not seem important. But if you work in healthcare, it is your job to control infections.

What Are Infections?

An infectious disease always comes from somewhere. No one is "born with" an infectious disease such as tuberculosis. People are afraid of "catching" an infectious disease. They want to avoid contact with an infected person.

There are three things that an infection needs to keep going:

- A source
- A method of transporting the disease
- A host

The infected person is the source. The air transmits many diseases. The host could be YOU. If you become infected, then you are the source of infection for another person.

To stop an infectious disease, you must stop the way it is spread. There are several different methods of infection transmission:

- Contact
- Droplets
- Airborne
- Common vehicles
- Vectors

First, let's talk about contact.

Infection spreads when the body surface of an infected source touches a body surface of a host. Contaminated objects may also spread disease. Unwashed hands are a big reason that diseases are spread to others.

- Droplets spread infection when an infected person coughs, sneezes, laughs or talks. The droplets "spray out" of his mouth and can travel up to three feet. If these droplets land in your mouth, nose or eyes, you can become infected.
- Airborne infections are so small that they stay in the air. They are the germs that remain when a droplet has dried up. This makes them very contagious. Just breathing the same air as someone with TB or chicken pox or German measles can cause infection
- Common vehicle means that contaminated items such as food or water spread infections. For instance, contaminated hamburgers were responsible for the spread of E. coli. Vector transmission means that carriers, such as rats, mosquitoes, flies or mice spread the disease. Plague, malaria and many other diseases are spread this way.

What does "Infection Control" mean?

It is impossible to stop all sources of infection. Medicine will never be able to keep people from getting sick. But we can stop, or control, the spread of disease to others. Sick patients must keep their germs to themselves. The same goes for home health aides: We do not want to catch our patient's infection. But we do not want our patient to catch our germs either. Washing our hands, using masks and gloves are all good ways to keep infections from spreading. But is that all we can do? It is important that we understand how to protect our patients and how to protect ourselves.

Protecting Our Patients

As healthcare staff, we must be sure that our patients do not get sick just from being in the house or going out for doctor visits. We do not want the procedures we perform to result in the spread of infection. Sometimes the use of a catheter can cause a patient to get a UTI (urinary tract infection.)

Protecting Ourselves

Some things are simple. Always wear gloves before you touch a patient or his body fluids. Always wear a gown to keep infected materials from splashing on you. Put all needles and other sharp objects in a special container. Do not re-cap any used needles. Also, you should not do mouth-to-mouth on a patient because of the high risk of infection.

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) was invented to make sure that workers are not hurt by their job conditions. OSHA says your employer must provide gloves, gowns and sharps boxes. Your employer must also tell you about all the risks on your job. You should be trained on how to reduce the risks and be as safe as possible. OSHA says you should take courses like this one to learn how to stay healthy. Healthy workers will not make their patients sick.

Other Ways to Stay Safe

We are going to talk about some things you should do every time you care for a patient. You probably know all these things, but we will show you how to do them better.

Hand Washing-Wash your hands before and after you touch anything that has blood or body fluids on it. Body fluids are anything from a patient that is wet, except sweat. Other body products like saliva, mucous, and broken skin can be dangerous whether wet or dry.

Follow these rules about washing your hands:

- Wash your hands before you apply gloves and after you take them off.
- Wash your hands at any other time when they might have picked up germs.
- Wash your hands between patients.
- Wash your hands with plain soap and friction. Sometimes you may need to wash your hands with other products. Your supervisor will tell you when to use them.

Example: A CNA enters the room to turn a patient. She doesn't wash her hands. She notices that the sheets feel wet. It is urine! She puts on her gloves and cleans the patient. There is also stool on the sheets. The IV pole is in the way, so the CNA carefully moves the pole out of the way just a bit, being careful not to disturb the tubing. After the sheets are changed, the aide takes off her gloves and heads back to work in another room. The next patient then asks for help with her meal tray, so the CNA touches her spoon, straw and napkin.

What Went Wrong? The IV pole and the sheets are now contaminated with urine. The next person to touch the IV pole will be contaminated too. Germs also have been spread to Patient B's spoon, straw and napkin. When the CNA gets back to the agency, she will get germs on the charts and countertops. And when she wipes her runny nose, her own nose will be contaminated!

Another Example: A CNA is going to bathe a patient, she puts on gloves, but does not wash her hands first. As she bathes the patient, she discovers that the patient has a fresh skin tear on her arm. She continues to bathe the patient and removes her gloves when finished. The aide still does not wash her hands after removing her gloves.

What Went Wrong? Putting on gloves is not enough. You touch the outer surface of non-sterile gloves when putting them on. The germs on your hands are now on the outside of the gloves and can be passed on to the patient. You have not protected your patient. Furthermore, if the gloves had a small hole in them, then germs from the fresh skin tear could be on your hands. They will stay there until you wash your hands. You have not protected yourself.

Physical Barriers

A physical barrier is anything that comes between you and a patient. This includes gloves, gowns, aprons, masks, face shields and goggles. These things are used to:

- Keep your skin from getting infected by patient's body fluids.
- Keep the germs on your skin from infecting your patient.
- Keeps infections from spreading from one patient to another.
- Your employer must supply you with these necessary items. Do not forget to use them whenever you come into contact with a patient.

Example: One of your patients just had surgery. You must change his bandage and clean the wound regularly. There is still a good deal of bleeding at the site. You wash your hands, and then put on your gloves and gown.

Good Job! Don't risk getting infected. Since you put everything on with clean hands you will not infect your patient either. This is especially important in emergency situations.

Example: A patient in your care has a bad nosebleed. The doctor is wearing gloves as he packs the patient's nose. You are helping the doctor. You are also wearing gloves.

What Could Go Wrong? Do you really want your face that close someone with blood in her nose and mouth? The patient

could sneeze, cough or spit and you could get blood splashed on you. Gloves are good, but a face shield and gown would be even better.

Example: You just finished a messy procedure on a patient. You had on your gloves and a gown. You notice that it is now time for the patient's meds. You pour a glass of water from the pitcher on the bedside table. You open several medicine bottles and hand the patient his meds.

What Were You Thinking? The body fluids on your gown and gloves are now on the patient's water glass, pitcher and bedside table. They are also on all of his medicine bottles and possibly got on the pills themselves. You protected yourself but forgot about your patient. The next family member who touches the medicine bottles will also be infected. Always remove used gloves and other physical barriers when they become dirty. Also, always wash your hands after any procedure. We cannot break the rules just because we are busy.

Patient Placement

This is just common sense. A patient who has a disease that will infect other people should be kept in a private room. Someone who is vomiting or has diarrhea should be kept away from others. A patient with a loose, wet cough can also cause infection. Do not move the patient if possible. If you must move a patient, put a mask on him first.

Keeping Things Clean

How do we keep everything clean? OSHA has certain rules that must be followed. But there are other things we can do:

Patient Care Equipment

IV pumps, K-pads and bedside toilets should be cleaned and disinfected after each use. Equipment that can be thrown away should be put in special containers.

Linen/Laundry

Clean sheets should be kept in a safe place. Dirty sheets should be handled carefully. OSHA says that dirty sheets should be bagged and put into a container at the location of use. That way it will not infect your scrubs as you carry it. It will not infect the floor if it falls. Very dirty laundry should be double bagged to make sure the germs do not escape. If the laundry bag leaks, it should be double bagged.

Dishes, Glasses, Cups, Silverware

No special cleaning is needed. Hot water and soap will kill germs on these items.

Routine Cleaning

Ask your supervisor about the proper way to clean other surfaces such as floors, walls, beds, bedrails and other equipment.

Dangerous Waste

According to OSHA any waste that can leak blood or body fluids when handled is considered "Dangerous Waste." These items should be put in specially marked bags and containers. It should also be labeled as "Infectious" or "Biohazard Waste." Any sharp items, such as needles, must be put into a special colored, puncture-proof box. Ask your supervisor about the proper way to handle dangerous waste.

Infected Blood

Healthcare workers can come into contact with infected blood. You can get the following diseases from handling infected blood: HIV, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C.

Always handle any blood products very carefully. Ask your supervisor about the proper way to handle blood products. If you think you have been infected with someone else's blood, notify your supervisor as soon as possible. She will know what to do to help you stay healthy.