An Infection Control Module: Standard Precautions

ARE YOU ALLERGIC TO YOUR GLOVES?

Latex allergies develop over time with repeated or prolonged exposure. So, while you may not have been allergic to latex in the past, there is a chance you could develop a latex allergy in the future.

Latex contains certain proteins that cause allergic reactions. At least 10 different proteins have been linked to allergic reactions.

Other chemicals in gloves, known as accelerators and antioxidants, may also cause allergic reactions.

Typical allergic reactions to latex include itching, hives, swelling and runny nose.

More serious symptoms may involve wheezing, difficulty breathing, nausea, heart palpitations, decreased blood pressure and anaphylactic shock.

Ask your supervisor for latex-free gloves if you are experiencing a latex allergy.

THE FACTS ABOUT HANDWASHING

Scientists have known for more than 100 years that handwashing helps prevent infection. Yet, people continue to get sick because hands are not washed often enough.

The handwashing procedure at your workplace probably calls for you to wash your hands for 30 to 60 seconds. Yet, studies have shown that most health care workers spend less than 15 seconds washing their hands. Why? The reasons given include:

- “I don’t have time to keep washing my hands all the time.”
- “My skin gets dry if I wash my hands too often.”
- “There’s never a sink around when I need to wash my hands.”
- “I don’t need to wash my hands. I wear gloves.”

ALCOHOL BASED HAND SANITIZERS

In 2002, the CDC approved the use of alcohol based hand rubs in healthcare facilities. These waterless hand sanitizers eliminate some of the problems that health care workers face when taking care of clients.

- Alcohol based hand rubs are faster because you can rub your hands while you are moving between clients.
- Hand rubs are gentler and do not cause the irritation, drying and cracking you find with hand soaps.

To use: Place a small amount in the palm of one hand. Rub hands together, being sure to cover all surfaces of hands and fingers. **Rub until hands are dry.**

- Only use waterless hand rubs when hands are not visibly soiled. If hands are visibly soiled always wash with soap and water.

REMEMBER!

- Keep your fingernails clean and short. You should avoid wearing nail polish or artificial nails.
- Do not wear rings or other hand jewelry. The skin underneath will have more bacteria because jewelry can block soap and water from reaching those areas.
- Make sure that you cover any cuts or abrasions with a waterproof dressing.
- Be sure to wash your hands before and after wearing gloves. Wearing gloves does not take the place of handwashing.
HANDLING CLIENT CARE EQUIPMENT

Client care equipment includes everything you used during your work with a client such as thermometers, blood pressure cuffs, bath basins, bed pans, bedside commodes, walkers and wheelchairs.

Carefully clean any equipment that must be used from one client to another. If possible, limit equipment to only a single client. Any “used” client care equipment should be cleaned according to your workplace policy.

- If you work in a facility, you probably use a product like Cavicide® to clean equipment and surfaces. Be sure to read the label and follow the directions carefully. Always wear gloves when using these products to prevent damage to your skin.
- If you work in clients’ homes, common products that are available in grocery stores should work. Read the label and look for products that list staph and e-coli among the “germs” it kills.
- Remember that sponges and cleaning rags carry lots of germs. If you “clean” client areas with a dirty sponge, you might just be spreading germs around. Be sure to change your sponge or rag frequently.
- If a client care item is only meant to be used once, be sure to throw it away after using it.
- Dishes and silverware used by clients with bloodborne diseases do not have to be washed separately. Regular dishwashing soap and hot water will kill bloodborne germs.

LINENS AND BEDS

- Do not shake dirty client linens. Instead, roll them up and place them in a hamper or bag for cleaning.
- Be careful when you handle dirty linens so that you don’t soil your clothes. Hold dirty linen away from your body.
- Linen that is soiled with blood and/or other body fluids should be washed according to your workplace policy. It does not have to be washed separately from other laundry.
- In the home, clothing and bedding should be machine washed often and thoroughly. Machine drying instead of hanging (to air-dry) works much better at killing germs.

WHAT IF YOU ARE EXPOSED?

Ask your supervisor for the written policy and procedure on what you should do if you are exposed to bodily fluids. Then, answer the following questions:

If I am stuck by a used needle, I should:

If I get bodily fluid splashed in my eyes, I will:

If I have been exposed a client that is later found to have TB, I should:

If I have an open wound, I will:
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1. You work in a germ factory! You are constantly surrounded by germs. Some may be serious, and some may even be deadly.

2. Using Standard Precautions is the only proven way to protect yourself and others from germs. It is the only way to break the Chain of Infection.

3. Standard Precautions are basic infection control guidelines for you to follow as you perform your daily work. They include guidelines that require you to wash your hands, use protective equipment like gloves, gowns and masks, and handle infectious waste material properly.

4. Standard Precautions are written and regulated by OSHA. And, OSHA regulations are federal law. This makes following Standard Precautions guidelines mandatory within all U.S. healthcare facilities.

5. Unfortunately, no one is going to follow you around and make sure you are following standard precautions all the time. It’s up to you to do the right thing to keep yourself and your clients safe.

Biohazardous waste is any waste that has been contaminated with germs that can cause disease. It includes things like:

- Discarded wound dressings.
- Used needles.
- The contents of a bedpan, urinal or Foley catheter bag.
- Gowns and gloves used on clients with transmission based precautions.

Follow your workplace policies and procedures for disposing of biohazardous waste. Here are some general guidelines:

- Bodily wastes like urine, stool or vomit can be flushed through the regular sewer system. Be sure to empty contents into the toilet—not the sink or tub.
- Solid wastes should be bagged in an appropriately labeled red plastic biohazard bag.

**DISPOSING OF SHARPS**

Be extra careful with any client care equipment that might cut or stick you.

- Never recap used needles.
- Use only one hand or a mechanical device and hold the needle with the point away from any part of the body.
- Never remove used needles from disposable syringes by hand.
- Never bend or break needles by hand.
- Used “sharps” must be disposed of in a puncture-resistant container.

In the Home: Official sharps containers are available for sale at most home health supply stores and can be found online.

In some states, it is okay to use a hard plastic container, like a soda bottle or bleach bottle with a screw top lid for sharps disposal. Check the law by contacting your county Department of Health.

Do You Recognize This Symbol? It’s the symbol for biohazardous waste. Never put your bare hand into a bag or other container marked with this symbol! These containers are used to dispose of used sharps and infectious waste.

It is estimated that each year 385,000 needlesticks happen to healthcare personnel. That’s an average of over 1,000 per day!
We should all take great care to prevent the spread of illness and infection. With attention to detail and sensible work habits, most infection control-related accidents can be avoided. Here are some important safety reminders:

- Remember to stay focused on what you are doing. Don’t let yourself go on “autopilot” because you have done the task so many times before.
- Get enough sleep. Being tired can lead to careless behavior.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it.
- Don’t try to do too many things at once.
- Never take shortcuts when it comes to infection control.
- Avoid thinking that you have nothing to learn about infection control—even if you have been working in health care for years.

TELL YOUR CLIENTS WHY STANDARD PRECAUTIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Some clients may get offended when they see you wearing gloves. They may say something like, “Oh, you don’t need gloves. I don’t have anything that’s contagious.” Be sure to explain that protective barriers like gloves, gowns and masks are for their protection as well as yours. Tell them:

- These precautions can prevent the spread of infection from one part of their body to another (cross-contamination).
- That gloves prevent the spread of disease and infection from one client to another.
- That they should insist on the use of clean gloves from each of their healthcare workers—and that they should ask all employees who come in their room to wash their hands.

WHY REVIEW BLOODBORNE PATHOGENS EVERY YEAR?

If you’ve been working in health care for a while, you’ve probably noticed that you have to review information about Standard Precautions and bloodborne pathogens every year.

Why? It’s the law! All healthcare employees are required to participate in an annual review of bloodborne pathogens and Standard Precautions. While it may seem pointless to go over the same information every year, remember that infection control procedures are in place to protect you as well as your clients. So, take the time to read up on Standard Precautions each year.