



## I Got Poked

A body tech was working on a car that had been recovered after being stolen. It was a mess, with drugs left inside. As the body tech pulled off a panel, he felt a sharp prick. He had been poked with a discarded needle, which looked like it was filled with blood.



What would you do if you were that tech?

- a) Start sucking on the puncture to remove the venom
- b) Amputate
- c) Drop everything and run to the emergency room
- d) Ignore it
- e) Figure you probably just got HIV/AIDS, so your life is over
- f) Wash it, report it, go to an occupational health clinic for appropriate medical follow-up (Hint: the right answer is usually the longest one).

There's no need to panic, but there is a reason to act. That needle prick could infect you with a bloodborne pathogen. There's also a risk that the syringe held some dangerous drug. At least he doesn't need to worry about HIV/AIDS. That virus just doesn't survive outside the human body, and it takes a pretty big dose to infect someone.

The pathogen most likely to cause a work-related disease from blood exposure is hepatitis B. That's a very durable virus, able to live outside the human body for at least two weeks. It doesn't take a big dose to infect. If you are pricked with a needle that was just used by someone with hepatitis B, disease experts estimate that you have a 6 - 30% chance of getting the disease. Hepatitis C is more common, but harder to get. The experts estimate that the chance of getting that from a fresh needlestick is 1-3%. HIV's risk: about 0.3%.

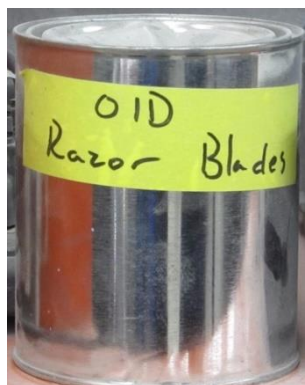
Why is hepatitis B a concern? In most adults, a hepatitis B infection causes a short-lived illness resembling the flu. Most people recover completely. But about 5% of infected adults (and 90% of infected children) develop chronic hepatitis, where the disease causes severe liver damage. It can also cause liver cancer. People with chronic hepatitis can transmit the disease, even if they have no symptoms.

What should that tech have done? If he started to feel sick or disoriented, a call to 9-1-1 would be in order. Otherwise, he needed to secure the needle, wash the area with soap and water, and tell his boss. If you were his boss, you'd send him to your local occupational health clinic. The clinic would follow the protocol laid out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: give him the very effective vaccination against hepatitis B, if he hasn't had it; take a blood sample to test for disease; and possibly give him antibodies against the disease. The antibodies need to be given soon after exposure, so you need to get him into the clinic that day or the next.

What would you tell your employees to do if they found a needle? If they can leave it where it is, do that. Let the owner of the vehicle deal with it. But if there's any chance that a technician could be pricked, pick up the needle.

Don't pick it up with your hands, even if you wear gloves. It's too easy to poke yourself. That's how a lot of nurses and laboratory technicians became infected. They recapped needles, successfully most of the time. But it only took one miss to become infected. Instead, use pliers or another tool to pick up the needle. Then put it in a hard puncture-resistant container, such as a detergent jug. Seal the container and label it as infectious waste.

Needles that have been used on people are considered infectious waste. The easiest way to get rid of them is to find someone who routinely handles infectious waste, such as an occupational health clinic, to take it. So, if you are going to the clinic, take the container with you. But if you can't do that, the needle could be brought to a household hazardous waste collection site.



According to the MPCA, "businesses that find infectious waste in employee, customer, or public areas or vehicles during cleaning" can handle those sharps the same way a household would.

The razor blades that we see abandoned throughout body shops are considered sharps. But their disposal isn't regulated, because they don't have the potential to be infected unless someone is cut with one. Decrease the risk of that. Have employees dispose of those in puncture-resistant containers. We like what one shop did, using small paint cans labeled as "old razor blades."

The takeaway:

- Watch out for needles and other sharps.
- If you find a sharp, handle it with a tool.
- If you are pricked:
  - Wash
  - Report
  - Get medical attention within the next day.

This article is intended to provide general information (no advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or [chess@chess-safety.com](mailto:chess@chess-safety.com)

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