

# Blood-borne diseases and people who inject drugs

A blood-borne disease is a blood infection that can be passed from one person to another through exposure to contaminated blood. In the past five years in Utah, the number of newly reported cases of blood-borne diseases, such as HIV, hepatitis C (HCV), and hepatitis B (HBV), has risen. The increase in cases correlates with increases in injection drug use, a result of the opioid epidemic. As illegally obtained prescription opioids, such as OxyContin, become harder to obtain, many individuals who are dependent on these opioids turn to more readily available illegal substances, such as heroin and fentanyl, which are commonly injected into the bloodstream.

## How are blood-borne diseases spread among people who inject drugs?

Sharing drug injection equipment can lead to the spread of blood-borne diseases. There are multiple points of contact with blood during the injection process, and even exposure to a very small amount of contaminated blood puts a person at risk of contracting a blood-borne disease. *When a person injects an illicit drug, such as heroin, the following items can become contaminated with blood: syringes, needles, drug cooking containers, cotton filters, tourniquets, and gauze.*

## Who is at risk?

People who inject drugs and share syringes, needles, and other equipment put themselves at risk of contracting a blood-borne disease. Additionally, people who come in contact with contaminated syringes and needles are at risk of exposure to diseases through a needle stick: these include first responders, firefighters, police officers, family and friends of people who inject drugs, and the community at large. Because of the lack of testing centers and rates of injection drug use, people in rural areas are at an increased risk of spreading diseases. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified three counties in Utah with an increased risk of an HCV or HIV outbreak, in part, due to injection drug use in their communities: Beaver County, Carbon County, and Emery County.

## What can be done to stop the spread of disease among people who inject drugs?

In order to reduce the spread of disease, people who inject drugs must use clean, sterile syringes and equipment every time they inject. Programs, such as syringe exchange programs, provide free sterile syringes and other drug injection equipment to injection drug users. Syringe exchange is just one component in providing people who inject drugs with opportunities for a healthier future.

For more information about syringe exchange in Utah, please contact [syringeexchange@utah.gov](mailto:syringeexchange@utah.gov).

### HEPATITIS C (HCV) FAST FACTS:

1. HCV is a serious blood-borne infection that can result in liver damage, liver failure, and liver-related death.
2. In the past five years, Utah has seen an increase in HCV cases at more than twice the national average.
3. Dried, HCV-contaminated blood is infectious for up to six weeks.
4. People younger than 40 years of age and people who are new to injecting drugs have a significantly higher risk of contracting a blood-borne disease.