

Human Immunodeficiency (HIV or AIDS) and Hepatitis B or C Virus Precautions for Doulas

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HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and Hepatitis B and C may be transmitted when the body fluids (blood, mucus, breastmilk, amniotic fluid, vaginal secretions, and, to a lesser extent, urine, saliva, and meconium) of an infected person come into contact with a break in your skin or your mucous membranes (your eyes, mouth, or nasal passages). These viruses are killed by soap and water, bleach, alcohol, and viricides (virus-killing antiseptics).

Which women are more likely to carry HIV or Hepatitis B or C? It is possible for any woman to unknowingly carry these viruses. Those at greater risk, however, include women who have used IV street drugs and those who have had a sexual partner who is bisexual or has been an IV drug user. Receiving a blood transfusion of infected blood presents some risk as well, though blood banks take precautions.

To protect yourself from possible exposure, you should consider taking the following precautions when providing labor support:

1. Be aware of locations of any breaks in your skin (cuts, scratches, scabs, rashes, insect bites or stings, skin conditions, hangnails, etc.). These and your mucus membranes are potential entry points for the HIV and HBV.
2. Wear washable clothing (including shoes and slippers).
3. When you arrive at the hospital, find where the disposable gloves are kept (usually in a dispenser near the sink). Take two and put them in your pocket for convenient use.
4. Do not handle used or uncapped needles or sharp instruments. These are supposed to be disposed of by hospital personnel according to specific protocols. Let the caregiver do it.
5. Try to avoid contact with the woman's and baby's body fluids. Wear gloves before touching anything that might have her fluids on it.
6. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
7. Put on gloves before handling sheets, towels, gowns, hot compresses which may have absorbed body fluids, and wash your hands or other exposed areas afterwards. For example:
 - a. if you help the woman change her gown;
 - b. if you change her bed linen;
 - c. if you remove towels or linen used to wipe up secretions;
 - d. if you are applying and changing hot compresses to the perineum;
 - e. if you are doing laundry (at a home birth) or collecting and removing trash. Use double plastic bags and dispose of them. The caregiver should label trash bags "medical waste" before disposal.
 - f. if you hold the woman's leg during pushing.
8. Use caution when handling the placenta or the unbathed newborn. Truly, the parents should be holding the newborn in most circumstances. Wear gloves, place the placenta in an impervious (plastic) container and double-bag it. If putting it out for trash collection, mark it "medical waste" and put it out shortly before pickup. Wash hands and other exposed areas afterwards.
9. There are items of protective clothing available to protect people from contact (splashes, touching secretions, scratches from sharp instruments which have been exposed to body fluids): gloves, glasses or goggles, hydrophobic (fluid-resistant) suits, etc. Investigate which of those would be available to you as a doula.
10. Shower and launder your clothing after going to a client. Wear washable shoes or slippers.

Ideally, these precautions should be followed with all clients, not only those perceived by you to be at risk.