

# Preventing disease transmission in contact sports

In today's society, it has become critical for everyone in the population to take measures against the spread of infectious diseases.

While disease transmission such as HIV in athletics is low (less than 1 per 1 million games), it is still the responsibility of the coach, athlete, and parent to be educated in the mechanisms, likelihood, and most of all, prevention of communicable diseases.

The disease process begins when a pathogen, or germ, gets into the body. The most common pathogens are viruses and bacteria, and are most commonly transmitted in athletics through the following mechanisms:

- Direct contact: A person touches bodily fluids from an infected person.
- Indirect contact: A person touches objects (equipment, jerseys) that have touched the blood, or another bodily fluid, such as vomit or saliva, of an infected person.

Everyday the human body is at risk for contracting an infectious disease, but participation in athletics can increase that risk if proper precautions are not made.

Some sports may have a potentially higher risk of transmission where there is close contact and possibility of passing blood on to the other person. Hockey is classified as a 'moderate risk' sport, along with basketball, football and soccer. It is therefore essential for every sports program to develop and carry out an exposure control plan, including counseling, education, volunteer testing, and management of bodily fluids.

The following are some guidelines to be followed specifically when participating in contact sports:



## ASK THE DOCTOR

By Dr. Jeff S. Pierce



- Preparing the athlete: Before an athlete participates in practice or competition, all open skin wounds and lesions must be covered with a dressing that is fixed in place and does not allow for transmission to or from another athlete.

- Blood exposure and management: Athletes with active bleeding must be removed from participation as soon as possible and returned only when it is deemed safe by the medical personnel. Uniforms must be inspected for blood, and appropriately cleaned with an EPA approved disinfectant before an athlete can return to participation. A uniform that is saturated with blood must be removed immediately and bagged separately from other laundry. All handling of blood, or other bodily fluids, as well as contaminated surfaces and materials should be done while wearing disposable latex gloves. Special care must be taken not to contaminate other surfaces or objects (i.e. pens) while wearing soiled gloves.

- Protective equipment and supplies: Specifically in an arena where contact sports such as hockey are played, protective equip-

ment (i.e. disposable latex gloves, antiseptics) should be kept in the properly stocked first aid kit. Every arena should also have readily available chlorine bleach (one part bleach to 10 parts water) for disinfecting contaminated surfaces.

- Personal precautions: Immediately after exposure to potentially infectious bodily fluids, individuals should wash their hands, and all exposed skin surfaces, with antiseptics. Practicing good personal hygiene including frequent hand washing, and proper grooming, will also help reduce the risk of disease transmission.

Special care should be made to avoid contact with any blood or bodily fluid as well as contaminated surfaces. Finally, notify the medical staff immediately if blood exposure has occurred.

Following these guidelines will help reduce the risk of infectious disease transmission. If you have further questions regarding the implementation of Universal Precautions in your program, feel free to contact the staff at the Michigan Sports & Spine Center.