

Frequently Asked Questions About the Dental Public Health Investigation

How could I have been exposed to Hepatitis B (HBV), Hepatitis C (HCV), or Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in a dentist's office?

When dentists and other healthcare professionals do not follow proper infection control procedures, patients can be at risk to acquire these diseases. Proper infection control techniques include thorough disinfection and sterilization of instruments, proper disposal of sharp objects, use of single dose medication vials or proper handling and administering of multi-dose vial medications when used in the facility, and never reusing items such as needles and syringes between patients.

Does this happen very often in other dentist's offices?

No, most dentists practice proper infection control procedures.

Has HBV, HCV, or HIV transmission ever occurred before in a dental setting?

Very rarely, HIV and HBV have been known to be transmitted in the dental setting. HCV transmission has not been documented in the dental setting.

What do dentists do to protect their patients from being exposed to these bloodborne viruses?

Dentists, like other healthcare professionals, are trained to utilize what is known as Standard/Universal Precautions to protect themselves and their patients. Standard/Universal Precautions require that the blood and other body fluids of all patients be handled as if they contain viruses or other micro-organisms in the blood that can cause human disease. Appropriate use of hand washing, protective barriers such as gloves, injection safety including proper medication preparation and administration, and care in the use and disposal of needles and other sharp instruments are also important components of observing Standard/Universal Precautions.

How will I be notified of today's test results? How long will it take to get results?

Most persons will be notified of their test results within 1 to 2 weeks. If you have negative test results and give the health department permission to mail negative test results to your home, you will be notified in this manner. Anyone who has a positive test result will be personally notified by a professional from the health department to provide more information about the test results and provide recommendations for follow up and care.

What happens if I test positive for HBV, HCV, or HIV?

If any of your test results are positive, you will be contacted by a professional from the health department for an interview. You will be provided with information specific to the disease for which you test positive and will be referred to your private physician for further evaluation.

Where will I go for treatment and care if I don't have insurance?

If your test result is positive, a counselor will address your follow-up needs. A health department professional will provide you with information regarding resources that are available in your area in the event that you do not have insurance or a private physician.

Should my family members get tested, too, even though they did not have dental surgery at the practice of concern?

No, at this time, only persons who had the dental procedures are considered to be at risk of exposure to the bloodborne viruses and are recommended to obtain testing. Testing of family members may be advised if one of your tests is positive. Those recommendations will be made at the appropriate time.

What else is the health department doing to ensure this doesn't happen again?

The health department is actively investigating this situation to determine if diseases were transmitted and why. Once this is better understood, the health department can take steps to ensure that this doesn't occur again.

Is every patient of Dr. Harrington's being notified?

Every known patient of Dr. Harrington's is being notified of the need to be screened for HBV, HCV, and HIV. Patient information was only available from the past seven years, therefore, we do not have the ability to notify patients who had procedures many years ago. A press release from the health department is expected to inform others who may not be included in the available patient listing.

When was the problem identified?

The problem was identified on March 12, 2013 following a public health site investigation to Dr. Harrington's clinic.

Are any patients known to have been infected?

At this time, we do not know if any patients were infected due to exposures at the dental surgical clinic. We hope that our investigation will determine if the improper practices led to infection of some dental patients. Right now, we just want to inform persons that may have been at risk of exposure and provide testing, so they know their infection status.

Is the problem still going on?

No, once the improper practices were identified, the dental practice ceased patient care.

Who is performing the public health investigation?

The public health investigation is being conducted by both the Oklahoma State Department of Health and the Tulsa County Health Department.

When will the investigation be complete?

It is not possible to say how long the investigation will take. Investigations of this nature require extensive laboratory testing and follow up.

Who is responsible for making sure that dentists are following proper procedures?

This is a question for the Oklahoma Board of Dentistry. They can be contacted at 405-524-9037.

I was a patient there many years ago. Should I be tested, even though I did not receive a notification?

We do not know how long these improper practices have been occurring, so we recommend that all patients of Dr. Harrington's be tested for Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV.

Is it too late to be tested?

No, if you have been infected, testing will always be positive, even years after infection.

How soon can I be tested?

The tests used to identify Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV are based on your body's immune response to infection, which can take week to months to develop. If you are infected, people will begin to test positive within weeks, with almost all testing positive within 6 months. If you are tested prior to 6 months after your exposure and are found to be negative, it is recommended that you are tested again at 6 months after exposure to ensure that you are negative.

Where can I call if I have more questions?

Please call the Tulsa county health department at 918-595-4500.