

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Dry cleaning and laundry industry - Contaminated laundry

Why is contaminated laundry a health and safety issue?

There is the possibility of being exposed to infectious diseases when handling soiled laundry, including Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. Laundry that has been soiled by blood and body fluids, or contains used needles, presents the greatest risk.

This type of laundry is most likely to come from:

- medical facilities – hospitals, doctors' surgeries, dentists' offices
- community care facilities – aged care facilities, child care centres
- accommodation facilities – hotels, motels, hostels.

It may be difficult to tell which items of laundry have been contaminated or contain needles. You should therefore treat all soiled linen as a potential source of infection and take steps to protect people from infectious diseases.

How can you minimise exposure to infectious diseases?

There are a number of steps that can minimise exposure to biological diseases when handling laundry.

Laundry bags

- if linen is moist from blood or body fluids, it should be placed by the facility in

securely closed bags designed to be leak proof (e.g. plastic)

- use appropriate bags for collecting linen, for example, a coloured bag system can be used to distinguish contaminated linen from ordinary linen (e.g. red bags for contaminated linen and white bags for ordinary linen).

Storage

Steps should be taken to prevent clean laundry from being contaminated by soiled linen. This may be achieved by:

- separating soiled and clean linen by an appropriate barrier (e.g. a physical barrier like a wall or a space barrier of at least two metres between storage areas for soiled laundry and clean laundry)
- providing adequate ventilation to prevent airborne contaminants travelling from dirty storage areas to clean storage areas.

Transporting

Controls also need to be taken when transporting laundry to, from and within the workplace. This might include:

- using clean trolleys, bins or other transport equipment
- transporting soiled linen and clean linen, where possible, in different trolleys, bins or other transport equipment
- if a trolley has carried soiled laundry, thoroughly clean it before it is used to carry clean linen
- where a trolley fitted with a liner is used to transport soiled laundry, use a clean liner before transporting clean laundry

- transporting clean and soiled laundry in different vehicles unless they are separated by a suitable barrier, preventing contamination between the soiled and clean laundry.

Contaminated sharps

There is a possibility that the laundry could contain contaminated sharp objects (e.g. used needles). If these sharp objects penetrate the skin, they can allow infection to enter the body.

To reduce the likelihood of this happening you can:

- develop safe work methods for preventing and managing needle stick injuries where this is a risk
- Avoid handling sharps wherever possible
- always dispose of sharps in a safe way, for example:
 - use a sharps disposal kit containing a sharps container, gloves and tongs
 - bring the container to the needle and do not carry the needle over to the container
 - use suitable tools (e.g. tongs) to handle sharps, as other items such as sticks may result in the needle flicking and can cause injury
 - if an appropriate tool to handle sharps is not available, dispose of the needle by picking it up by the middle of the barrel of the syringe
 - keep the sharp end of the needle facing away from you and place the needle in the container sharp end first
 - securely close the container
 - wear disposable gloves to handle the needle/syringe if these are available and wash your hands with running water and soap afterwards
 - dispose of the sharps container safely.
- avoid lifting laundry bags by the base or compressing them manually
- use trolleys to move bags of laundry instead of carrying them by hand (particularly against the body)
- avoid putting your hands in places you can't see (e.g. into laundry bags)

- avoid working where there is insufficient light to see discarded sharps.

Procedures

Setting up appropriate work procedures will also help minimise exposure to infectious disease risks.

These procedures might include:

- processing soiled laundry for washing as soon as possible after it arrives
- handling bags containing soiled laundry carefully to avoid damage to bags and release of contaminated air
- ensuring laundry bags are secured properly before transport
- minimise staff movement from areas where soiled laundry is handled to areas where clean laundry is processed
- when staff leave the soiled laundry area they should be instructed to:
 - change their outer protective clothing (e.g. aprons and gloves)
 - wash their hands
- teaching staff appropriate personal hygiene requirements, particularly the need for hand washing after handling soiled laundry, after removing personal protective equipment (PPE) and before eating, drinking and smoking (adequate hand washing facilities and change rooms need to be provided to ensure good personal hygiene is maintained)
- prohibiting smoking and confining eating and drinking to appropriate areas
- implementing an immunisation program to vaccinate against:
 - **Hepatitis B** for workers who have regular contact with laundry contaminated with blood and body fluids
 - **Hepatitis A** for workers who have regular contact with laundry contaminated with faeces
 - **Q Fever** for workers who have regular contact with laundry from abattoirs
- providing PPE, where appropriate, and training staff in how to use it (e.g. gloves, face shields, eye goggles, aprons)

- regular cleaning and maintenance of buildings and equipment, including the disinfecting of surfaces contaminated by blood and body fluids
- providing information and training to staff about infectious disease risks from soiled linen and how to prevent exposure
- instructing staff to cover cuts and other skin lesions with a water resistant dressing.

For more information on contaminated laundry and general obligations workplace health and safety issues call 1300 369 915 or visit www.worksafe.qld.gov.au

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