

Briefing for people who inject drugs

The supply of 5ml plastic ampoules of sterile water for injection is currently subject to disruption. This disruption affects the whole of the UK and is ongoing. Although NHS and others are working hard to sort this problem, it is not known when the situation will be fully resolved.

This is a concern as there are risks associated with using unsuitable choices of water to prepare drugs for injection. These risks include bacterial infections or if water sources are shared with other people then this may increase the risk of blood borne virus transmission.

People should continue to access their Injecting Equipment Provider (needle exchange) as normal.

Many needle exchanges still have a supply of water for injection so people should still ask for this.

This should still be treated as one ampoule for each injection. Although tempting to keep and reuse open ampoules of water, it's likely the water, once opened, will be contaminated with bacteria and therefore high risk.

If your needle exchange is not able to provide water for injection, you will have to use water from another source. The next page shows a hierarchy of harm advice which is evidence based and should be followed wherever possible.

WATER

How to reduce the risk of abscesses, swelling, and infections

NO ADDED RISK OF BACTERIAL INFECTION

UNOPENED AMPOULE OF STERILE WATER FOR INJECTIONS
Manufactured for medical use, so therefore completely safe. If used once and surplus is thrown away.

NO ADDED RISK OF BACTERIAL INFECTION

WATER BOILED IN A KETTLE AND THEN COOLED
Good enough will kill all organisms, is easy for most and isn't too much trouble. If you haven't got a water amp, use water from a recently boiled kettle.

LOW RISK OF BACTERIAL INFECTION

COLD WATER FRESHLY RUN FROM THE KITCHEN TAP
Likely to come from the rising main, and, in the UK, will be very clean. Better than water from the bathroom which may have come from a tank in the loft.

RISK OF BACTERIA

HOT WATER FROM A TAP
Hot water tanks aren't usually hot enough to kill bacteria - needs using hot water taps, cold is better.

RISK OF BACTERIA

BOTTLED WATER
It may be pure, but it can have bacteria in it - especially if someone has drunk from it. Pour into the cap and draw up from there so you don't contaminate the bottle further.

MEDIUM TO HIGH RISK OF BACTERIA

SHARED CUP OF WATER
Could have bacteria from the needle, or even blood. Throw it away, and get fresh.

MEDIUM TO HIGH RISK OF BACTERIA

PART-USED AMPOULE OF WATER FOR INJECTIONS
Could be contaminated by a needle, even a small risk of viral infection if there is blood in it. Tap water is safer, throw away part-used amps.

HIGH RISK OF BACTERIAL INFECTION

TOILET WATER
Risk can be reduced by flushing the toilet and catching the water before it enters the bowl. Look out for empty bottles you can get filled from a tap.

VERY HIGH RISK OF BACTERIAL INFECTION

PUDDLE WATER OR SALIVA
Too dangerous to be a last resort, try asking people for their almost empty bottles of water.

TOO MUCH ACID
INCREASES THE RISK OF INFECTIONS

HIGH RISK OF BACTERIAL INFECTION

Having your solution too acidic causes tissue damage, making it vulnerable to infection. You don't need a whole sachet for less than a gram of heroin.

EXCHANGE SUPPLIES
MAKING INJECTING SAFER

The best alternative source is water that has been **boiled in a kettle and left to cool**

If that is not possible

The next best source is water that is **freshly run from cold tap in a kitchen**

If that is not possible

The next best source is water that is **freshly run from a hot tap but there are bacterial risks**

If that is not possible

The next best source is **bottled water but there are bacterial risks**

DO NOT USE

A shared cup of water

The remains of a part-used ampoule of water for injection

Water from a toilet

Water from a puddle or any other standing water

Do not share any water source water with anyone

Blood borne viruses

Sharing any source of water with other people increases the risk of blood borne viruses (hepatitis b, hepatitis C and HIV). If you have shared water, or any other equipment used for the preparation or injecting of drugs, get tested. Treatment and care is available for all blood borne virus infections.

Smoking instead of injecting

This may be an opportunity for people injecting heroin to change their method of taking it, particularly moving from injecting to smoking. Needle exchanges provide foil for this purpose.

Getting into treatment

Maybe this is a time you are thinking about entering into treatment – being in treatment can help protect people from the risks and harms associated with injecting drug use.

Infection

You should seek medical advice and help if you have any signs that suggest you may have an infection. Infections are common but should always be taken seriously.

Often infections occur because of poor sterility when preparing drugs for injecting, not properly washing hands and target injecting site. Sometimes it is the actual drug that has been contaminated with anthrax, botulism etc.

What to look out for

Some signs of bacterial infection may be visually obvious such as **redness, swelling or heat** in or around the injecting site.

Sometimes people have symptoms such as **high temperature, fever, sweating, palpitations or generally feeling unwell.**

What to do

Infections can be serious and lead to a range of health consequences. Getting help early is important and may save the need for more complex medical interventions further down the line.

If there are ANY of the signs or symptoms listed above of infection- speak to a pharmacist, drugs worker, nurse or visit A&E.