

# About Department of Health and Human Services lookbacks

Information for patients

## What is a lookback investigation?

A lookback investigation is undertaken by the Department of Health and Human Services when a group of people are identified as potentially exposed to a particular health risk. The aim is to inform them about the risk and to advise them about further steps they are recommended to take.

Lookback investigations are often completed to rule out transmission of an infectious disease from a healthcare worker to patients, and frequently do not identify any such transmission.

The aim of any lookback is to:

- provide patients with information about the nature of any risk to which they have been exposed;
- detect the infection being investigated and ensure referral for medical and other management;
- provide advice on measures to prevent further transmission where appropriate;
- minimise any anxiety caused to patients and the wider public.

## How does a lookback begin?

Most lookbacks start with a concern being raised regarding a healthcare worker who has been diagnosed with an infectious disease that may have been transmitted to patients. This can either be because the health care worker hasn't adhered to correct infection control procedures or because the nature of their work exposes patients to risk of transmission, even where infection control is optimal.

In most investigations of this kind, a health care worker will have unknowingly exposed their patients to the infection as they will be unaware they have developed infection themselves. It is extremely rare for a health professional to knowingly put their patients at risk as this is counter to safe and appropriate professional conduct.

The chances of transmission are usually very small, however as the primary concern is always the welfare of patients, the department uses a lookback process to contact potentially exposed patients, offer advice and recommend testing and then provide assurance where results are negative. Should positive results be found, support and treatment options are provided to the patient. The department ensures there is minimal or no financial cost to patients, their families or carers for consultations, psychological support or testing as part of a lookback.

During a lookback investigation the department will not reveal the details of patients and the health care worker involved. However, in very rare circumstances, where reliable patient records are not available or criminal activity is suspected, the department may decide to identify the health care worker to the public.

## Who decides when a lookback is necessary?

As well as drawing on the expertise within the Department of Health and Human Services in areas including epidemiology and surveillance and communicable disease transmission, the department may convene an expert advisory group to provide independent advice on whether a lookback is necessary.

These experts review all the evidence gathered by the department to determine exactly what the level of risk of transmission may be. They then make a recommendation to the department's Chief Health Officer based on that information and the best available evidence related to transmission of that particular disease.

## How does the department contact patients?

Patient confidentiality is an important priority so great care is taken when handling personal patient details. The department usually contacts patients by sending a letter to individuals requesting they contact the department to discuss a confidential matter related to their health.

The department also takes great care to only speak to the individual involved and can provide translation support if required.

## Who can I contact for more information?

**The only agency able to help with any information related to a lookback is the Department of Health and Human Services.** If you've been contacted by the department about a possible risk of disease transmission, you will also have been given a specific phone number to call.

No other health service or health professional will be able to answer questions about a lookback.

If you agree to be tested, the department will provide information to your doctor, but only with your permission.

If you'd like to speak to someone at the department, either call the number provided in your letter or call 1300 651 160.

If you have individual health concerns, see your doctor. You can find information about specific diseases on the Better Health Channel: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 1300 651 160, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email [infectious.diseases@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:infectious.diseases@health.vic.gov.au)

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

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