At Least 3 Women Contracted HIV From Vampire Facials, Confirms CDC

Linked to a New Mexico spa during 2018, the cases mark the first documented instance of HIV transmission through cosmetic injection.

April 30, 2024 By Trent Straube

A cluster of HIV cases from 2018 has been linked to vampire facials, a type of microneedling procedure, at a now-shuttered medical spa in Albuquerque. At least three women contracted HIV in what federal health researchers say is the first documented instance of HIV transmission through cosmetic injection, according to findings in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, a publication of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The vampire facial HIV story first made headlines in 2019, when the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) notified the public that a woman tested positive for HIV but had no known risk factors except for exposure to needles during a vampire facial the previous year at VIP Spa.

A vampire facial is a cosmetic procedure that involves injecting nutrient-rich plasma into the skin on the face to achieve a more youthful appearance. The plasma is typically collected from an individual's own blood before the facial.

The spa had closed in September 2018 because of unsafe practices and didn't keep precise records. Nonetheless, NMDOH and CDC health experts cross-checked available documentation to identify cases and offered former spa clients free and confidential testing. In April 2019, NMDOH announced that two clients had been diagnosed with the same strain of HIV.

In the 2024 MMWR report, CDC officials offer more details about the investigation, writing:

> HIV transmitted through cosmetic injection services via contaminated blood has not been previously documented. During summer 2018, the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) was notified of a diagnosis of HIV infection in a woman with no known HIV risk factors who reported exposure to needles from cosmetic platelet-rich plasma [PRP] microneedling facials (vampire facials) received at a spa in spring 2018. An investigation of the spa's services began in summer 2018, and NMDOH and CDC identified four former spa clients, and one sexual partner of a spa client, all of whom received HIV infection diagnoses during 2018–2023, despite low reported behavioral risks associated with HIV acquisition. Nucleotide sequence analysis revealed highly similar HIV strains among all cases. Although

> transmission of HIV via unsterile injection practices is a known risk, determining novel routes of HIV transmission among persons with no known HIV risk factors is important. This investigation identified an HIV cluster associated with receipt of cosmetic injection services at an unlicensed facility that did not follow recommended infection control procedures or maintain client records. Requiring adequate infection control practices and maintenance of client records at spa facilities offering cosmetic injection services can help prevent the transmission of HIV and other bloodborne pathogens and ensure adequate traceback and notification in the event of adverse clinical outcomes, respectively….
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> The investigative team identified 59 clients at risk for exposure, including 20 who received PRP with microneedling at spa A, and 39 who received other injection services (e.g., onabotulinumtoxinA [botox]) during the case-finding period.
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> By spring 2023, five patients had been identified, including four women and one man who was a sexual partner of one of the four women patients and never received any services from spa A [VIP Spa]. Blood specimens from the five patients and a former client with a 2012 HIV diagnosis were submitted to CDC for nucleotide sequence analysis to ascertain cluster association and determine case status; all five patients were confirmed to have spa A–related cases….
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> The two patients who were engaged in a sexual relationship had stage 3 or chronic HIV infections, indicating that their infections were likely attributed to exposures before receipt of cosmetic injection services. The other three patients in this cluster had no known social contact with one another, and no specific mechanism for transmission among these patients was confirmed. Evidence suggests that contamination from an undetermined source at the spa during spring and summer 2018 resulted in HIV-1 transmission to these three patients.

In 2021, the New Mexico Attorney General's office filed 24 felony charges against the former owner of VIP Spa. In July 2023, New Mexico health officials announced a third case had been linked to vampire facials at the Albuquerque establishment. Officials also reminded former clients to get tested for HIV as well as hepatitis B and C.

A properly performed vampire facial shouldn't expose anyone to HIV, hepatitis or other blood-borne diseases. But if the equipment used during the procedure, such as a microneedling pen, is not disposed of correctly or sterilized between facials, the risk of exposure to such diseases is high.

It's estimated that about 1.2 million Americans are living with HIV and that 2.4 million Americans were living with chronic hep C between 2013 and 2016 (about 1% of the adult population), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What's more, 14,242 people died of hepatitis C in 2019, and acute hep C cases quadrupled from 2009 to 2019. Nearly 862,000 were

living with chronic hep B in 2019. These numbers are likely higher now, spurred by the opioid crisis.

Hepatitis refers to inflammation of the liver. When untreated, it can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), liver cancer, the need for a liver transplant and death. Hepatitis can be caused by several factors, including toxins, excess alcohol use, autoimmune diseases, fat in the liver and viruses, including the three most common ones: hepatitis A, B and C. (Hep A is transmitted through contaminated food and water.) Effective vaccines are available for hep A and B. What's more, hep C (but not HIV and hep B) is curable in most cases.

According to "Hepatitis C Transmission and Risk," part of Hep's Basics of Hepatitis, hep C is most easily spread through:

- Sharing needles and other equipment (paraphernalia) used to inject drugs;
- Blood transfusions and organ transplants before July 1992;
- Sexual contact with someone who has hep C;
- Having a mother who had hep C when you were born.

HIV, in contrast, is a virus that attacks the immune system. Over several years, the immune system becomes depleted, and the body isn't able to fight infections, leading to an AIDS diagnosis.

Although there is no cure for HIV, many safe and effective treatments—often just one pill a day—are available. The medications help people living with HIV enjoy long and healthy lives and keep them from transmitting the virus to others. For more, see the Basics of HIV/AIDS in POZ.com, a sister publication of HepMag.com, RealHealthMag.com, CancerHealth.com and TuSaludMag.com.

According to "HIV Transmission and Risks" in the POZ Basics: HIV is transmitted through the following body fluids:

- Blood
- Semen
- Pre-cum

- Rectal fluids
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk.

There are several ways this can happen:

- From condomless vaginal/frontal or anal sex with someone who has HIV while not using a condom or not using medicines to prevent (pre-exposure prophylaxis [PrEP] or post-exposure prophylaxis [PEP]) or treat HIV (Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U).
- From sharing needles, syringes or other injection equipment with someone who has HIV while not using PrEP.
- From mother to child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. However, if the mother is in regular care and on HIV treatment, this risk is reduced to nearly zero.
- From being stuck with a needle or cut with a sharp object that contains HIV-positive blood. This is mostly a risk for health care workers.
- From getting a blood transfusion. However, this risk is rare in United States.

HIV is not transmitted though saliva, urine, feces, vomit, sweat, animals, bugs or the air.

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http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/article/least-3-women-contracted-hiv-vampire-facials-confirms-cdc