

Safe Handling and Disposal of Syringes and Other Sharps

Why is safe handling important?

It is important for healthcare staff to protect themselves against illness and injury by understanding how to safely handle and dispose of sharps. Safe handling and disposal of sharps is important to minimize the risk of accidental injury and exposure to potentially infectious blood-borne viruses. Accidental punctures by contaminated needles can expose healthcare staff to illnesses such as hepatitis B, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C.

The risk of infection following exposure to a contaminated needle varies by type of infection. Following exposure to a needle contaminated with hepatitis B, there is a 6-30% risk of becoming infected. Following exposure to a needle contaminated with HIV, there is a 0.3% chance of infection and following exposure to a needle contaminated with hepatitis C, there is a 2% chance of infection. In rare circumstances, it is also possible to transmit other illnesses such as herpes, malaria or tuberculosis, among others.

What is a needlestick or sharps injury?

Needlestick injuries are wounds caused by needles or other sharp medical waste items that accidentally puncture the skin. These injuries can occur during the use or disposal of needles or other sharp medical waste.

What should be done in the event of a needlestick injury?

It is important to seek immediate emergency first aid following any needlestick injury and to follow up as soon as possible by visiting your physician or a medical clinic. All needlestick injuries must be reported to your immediate supervisor.

OUCH! Here are some common causes of needlestick injury:

- **Most injuries related to sharps occur** when the healthcare staff replace the cap on a used needle. Never recap used needles. Always use safety engineered needles.
- **It is not safe to carry an uncapped, used needle.** They should be discarded immediately into an appropriate sharps container.
- **Removing needles from a syringe** increases the risk of needlestick injuries. Used needles should always be left attached to the syringe.

What are sharps?

Sharps are needles, syringes and other sharp objects used for medical purposes that could cause a puncture, cut or abrasion, including:

- Needles with or without syringes, including insulin pen needles
- Lancets or blades
- Broken medication ampoules or vials

What is a sharps container?

A sharps container is a rigid plastic puncture- and leak-proof container used to safely store sharps until they can be disposed of. Sharps containers must be closable and clearly labeled as containing hazardous material. They come in different shapes, colours and sizes suitable for storage in medication rooms, resident rooms and carts. **Never discard unused medications in the yellow sharps containers.**



Sharps container



Cytotoxic sharps container

DID YOU KNOW?

What happens to sharps and unused medications when they leave your home?

Yellow Sharps Container	→	Autoclaved
Red Cytotoxic Container	→	Incinerated
Pharmaceutical and Cytotoxic Waste	→	Incinerated

This is why it's important NOT to discard unused medication in the yellow sharps container!

Safe practice tips for the handling of sharps:

- **Never** recap needles.
- **Never** attempt to retrieve anything from a sharps container.
- **Never** dispose of sharps in the regular garbage.
- **Always** use single-use, safety engineered needles.
- **Dispose** of sharps into sharps containers immediately after use.
- **Keep** sharps containers near the point of use (e.g. on the medication cart, in the medication room or in the resident's room) to limit distance between use and disposal.
- **Do not** fill a sharps container more than $\frac{3}{4}$ full or beyond the "fill" line. An overfilled container could cause a needlestick injury.
- **When** the sharps container is $\frac{3}{4}$ full, secure the lid and store safely for pickup/destruction.
- **Sharps** that contain cytotoxic medications (e.g. methotrexate injection) are to be disposed of in the red cytotoxic containers.
- **Residents** and individuals that are self-injecting must dispose of all sharps into an approved sharps container.