

Safe Handling and Disposal of Sharps and Medical Supplies in Home Health Settings

This PSHSA Fast Fact Fact is intended to help home health caregivers, housekeepers and family members protect themselves, other people and the environment from infectious medical waste.

Do you provide health care or housekeeping services for someone at home? If so, you may have to dispose of sharp objects, soiled dressings or supplies that may be contaminated with infectious waste.

What are Sharps?

Sharps are sharp objects used for medical purposes, including:

- needles
- syringes with needles attached
- lancets
- razor blades
- other items that could cause a puncture, cut or abrasion

How Should I Handle Sharps?

Most injuries related to sharps occur when replacing the cap on a used needle. For this reason, used needles should not be recapped; instead, they should be discarded immediately into an appropriate sharps disposal container. It is not safe to carry an uncapped, used needle. Used needles should also be left attached to syringes to avoid injury. Other used sharps must also be handled with a great deal of care to prevent cuts.

What Features are Required of a Sharps Disposal Container?

A sharps disposal container must:

- Be made of puncture resistant material and not glass or thin plastic.

- Be leak-proof.
- Be designed to easily allow sharps to be placed in the container, but difficult to remove the contents, or have a lid that will seal the container when it is full.
- Be clearly labeled “hazardous materials”.
- Be large enough to hold the amount of sharps you use.
- Be disposed of in a suitable manner.

Daily Sharps Safety Check

On a daily basis, you should ensure that the sharps disposal container is:

- not punctured
- not filled above the “full” line
- not leaking
- not stored near food supplies
- not stored where children can reach it

Some drug stores or pharmacies will provide suitable sharps containers and will take your full sharps containers and dispose of them for you. Alternatively, you can call your local hospital, health unit or municipal waste authority to ask about where you can deliver the container for safe disposal. These numbers are located in your local telephone directory.

If you work for an agency that regularly provides health care in peoples’ homes, your employer may have made other arrangements with licensed waste handlers to dispose of used sharps safely.

What Do I Do with a Full Sharps Container?

Some drug stores or pharmacies will provide suitable sharps containers and will take your full sharps containers and dispose of them for you. Alternatively, you can call your local hospital, health unit or municipal waste authority to ask about where you can deliver the container for safe disposal. These numbers are located in your local telephone directory.

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What Should I Do if I am Injured by a Used Needle?

Workers are required to report all injuries occurring on the job to their supervisor. If you accidentally puncture or cut yourself with a used sharp, you should treat the wound using first aid measures and then seek medical attention. Depending on the source of the sharp, and your immune status, you may be offered prophylactic medications.

What are Soiled Dressings and Supplies?

Soiled dressings and supplies include:

- gauze and wipes used to cleanse wounds
- used sanitary napkins
- used bandages and tapes
- used diapers
- disposable sheets and drapes
- used incontinence pads
- other similar items

Soiled dressings and other medical supplies may contain infectious waste. These items should be handled carefully, using vinyl or latex gloves. Try to keep the materials away from your clothing. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after removing gloves and immediately after exposure to infectious waste.

What Do I Do with these Soiled Items?

- Place used disposable materials in plastic bags.
- Make sure the bags are securely closed (e.g., with a hard twist tie).
- Put the garbage bag out for regular garbage pickup.

For more information about disposing of infectious medical waste at home, call your local public health department or the local office of the Ministry of Environment and Energy.