



Fact Sheets and Information Papers

Management of Used Sharps

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1. BACKGROUND: Used sharps such as needles, scalpels, syringes, etc. pose a risk to both healthcare workers and patients because of bloodborne pathogens such as Hepatitis B and the HIV virus. Hepatitis B can remain viable for an extended period of time outside of the body while the HIV virus is considerably more fragile outside of the body. In a hospital environment, needle-sticks from used sharps are the easiest and surest method of transferring these pathogens into a new host (YOU). It is for this reason that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Army have published regulations on the management and disposal of used sharps. The Army regulations are consistent with OSHA regulations so only the Army regulations contained in AR 40-5 Chapter 11-7c (e) will be discussed in this paper.

2. USED SHARPS: The majority of needle sticks occur during sharps disposal according to the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). Therefore Army policy is; **DO NOT** recap, clip, break, and/or destroy sharps unless a one-handed method is employed.

3. SHARPS CONTAINERS:

a. Use a container that is made from a rigid and impervious material such as plastic and designed so that sharps will not be able to be retrieved once they are placed in the receptacle.

b. Clearly label the sharps container to indicate that the contents are regulated medical waste (RMW) consisting of sharps (include the biohazard symbol).

c. Secure the sharps container to the wall with a locking mechanism or place in a room or area that is locked or that is under constant visual supervision by healthcare personnel.

4. DISPOSAL:

a. A sharps container is considered full when two thirds to three fourths of the container is filled (consult hospital medical waste management regulation for definition of full).

b. The sharps container must be sealed before transport from its duty station to prevent spillage in the event of mishandling.

c. The containers may be transported either individually or in large regulated medical waste (RMW) containers along routes used for other regulated medical waste. If the sharps container(s) is to be transported to an off-post treatment site, it must be tracked in the same fashion as other RMW.

d. Sharps containers must be rendered noninfectious before final disposal. If the treatment process does not render the contents of the container unrecognizable (unusable), the container must be secured to prevent reuse of the sharps while they await final disposal.

e. Many states stipulate that the sharps must be rendered unrecognizable before final disposal. Some states, in their RMW regulations, have a definition of unrecognizable as less than 1/2 inch in length. Check to see if your state regulates the size of destroyed sharps.

NOTE: For safety considerations and to prevent unauthorized use, unused sharps slated for disposal may be placed in sharps containers and included in the RMW waste stream.

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