



EMPLOYMENT &  
HUMAN SERVICES

**M E M O R A N D U M**

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# Personal Sharps Safety and Disposal

## Sharps – Understanding the Risk

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 8 million people in the United States use more than 3 billion sharps (e.g. hypodermic needles, syringes, lancets) at home to treat medical conditions, administer important medicine, track blood-sugar levels, and for emergency situations (e.g., epinephrine, insulin pens). These home-generated “personal sharps” can be improperly disposed in regular trash.



Exposure to used sharps (i.e., a cut or needle stick) can be painful, and lead to the transmission of bacterial and viral diseases. Persons who encounter used sharps are at risk for exposure, with the highest risk to custodial staff, sanitation and sewage treatment workers, and children. Used sharps left loose among other waste pose an unacceptable risk to workers during trash collection, trash sorting and recycling, and at landfills. Due to these hazards, the State of California has banned sharps from being disposed in regular trash since September 2008.

## Sharps Injuries

People exposed to sharps face the risk of a cut or needle stick, and risk contracting serious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B or C. Some of these diseases can take a long time to manifest or may not have immediate, obvious clinical symptoms, so people may not realize that they need medical treatment after a needle stick. Therefore, all needle stick injuries must be treated as if the needle is infected with a disease. Victims of sharps-related injuries face a lengthy process of post-injury testing, disease prevention measures, and counseling, even if no infection is seen immediately, and maybe even the bad news of contracting a serious disease.

### If you are involved in a sharps-related injury:

- Immediately following the injury, wash the site with soap and water.
- Report the needle stick injury to your supervisor
- Seek medical attention and treatment
- Follow medical recommendations and treatment plans

## Regulated Sharps



Organizations such as medical facilities, clinics, and treatment centers that generate medical waste, including sharps waste, are regulated by the California Medical Waste Management Act, which requires sharps waste be disposed of in approved sharps containers. Sharps containers are rigid, puncture-resistant, leak proof containers, and are typically red in color with a biohazard label. They are specially designed to collect used sharps for safe disposal at a medical waste treatment facility. Sharps waste from these sites **must** be removed by a registered Medical Waste Transporter.

## Personal Sharps

For people who use sharps at home, Contra Costa Public Health recommends purchasing a household sharps container from a local pharmacy to hold sharps for safe transport and disposal. If a personal sharps disposal container is not readily available, sharps can be placed into a rigid puncture-resistant container. Here are some tips for choosing a safe container alternative:

- Use containers made of strong, heavy metal or plastic
- Use containers that have a small opening on top with a lid that seals tightly to prevent spills
- Use containers that cannot be reused

Once the needle is sealed, it can be transported to a safe location, and disposed of properly. Follow the recommended disposal methods for personal sharps listed in the next section.

## Disposal Methods for Personal Sharps

The Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal and the EPA provides information to the public about disposal methods for personal sharps waste. The public is encouraged to use one of the following disposal methods:

### Drop Box or Supervised Collection Sites

Sharps users can take their own sharps containers filled with used needles to appropriate collection sites at doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies, health departments, or fire stations. Services are free or have a nominal fee. Check with your doctor, pharmacist, health care provider, or fire station to verify this disposal method is available.

### Mail-back Programs

Sharps users place their used sharps in special containers which are returned by mail to a collection site for proper disposal, usually for a fee. Go to the Safe Needle Disposal program ([safeneedledisposal.org](http://safeneedledisposal.org)) for a list of companies that provide mail back services. Some companies recommended by local household hazardous waste facilities include:

- Stericycle (800-355-8773)
- Sharps, Inc. (800-772-5657)
- Biomedical Waste Solutions (877-974-1300)

### Syringe Exchange Programs (SEP)

Sharps users can safely exchange used needles for new needles. Contact the North American Syringe Exchange Network at 253-272-4857 or online at [www.nasen.org](http://www.nasen.org).

## Personal Sharps At Work – Employee Responsibilities

**It is the responsibility of every person working for CCC to dispose of personal sharps they use at work in an appropriate container and remove it from the workplace.** There is no countywide personal sharps disposal program, therefore each department has its own policy about supplying appropriate containers in their buildings for personal sharps disposal. If your department or building does not supply sharps disposal containers, it is your responsibility to use your own container and take your used sharps with you when you leave work.

If your department or building supply disposable sharps containers, they will be located in the bathrooms, are only to be used for sharps waste, not for regular trash. Do not to fill them above their “fill line.” If you identify a full sharps container, notify your supervisor.



## Sharps – Protecting Yourself & Others

If you come across a used sharp, the best way to protect yourself is to avoid handling it. If it is absolutely necessary to handle abandoned sharps, use mechanical means such as a broom and dustpan or a “grab claw” style device to eliminate manual handling of such items. If there are no other options and sharps must be handled manually, wear puncture-resistant gloves. The following are some safe sharps handling “DO’s” and “DONT’s”:

DO's	DONT's
Dispose all sharps through approved methods	Bend or break needles
Survey work areas and avoid sharps whenever possible	Remove needles from syringes
Inform your supervisor if open needles are found	Share needles with others
Inform your supervisor if you are involved with a sharps-related injury	Throw exposed sharps into trash
Use sharps with built-in safety features (caps, covers)	Attempt to recap needles or other sharps
Treat all sharps as though they are contaminated	Use your hands or feet to compact trash

For more information on Sharps Safety, visit:

<https://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/HomeHealthandConsumer/ConsumerProducts/Sharps/default.htm>, <http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/homehazwaste/sharps/>, and [safeneedledisposal.org](http://safeneedledisposal.org).