

Healthcare: Preventing Injury from Needlesticks and Sharps

What's at Stake?

Close to 400,000 healthcare workers a year sustain an injury by used hypodermic needles and other sharp instruments such as a scalpel blade and suture needles.

Such injuries are of concern because they can expose you to foreign, infectious materials. You're also at risk for injury when handling waste, surgical drapes, or bedding containing improperly discarded needles and sharps.

While there is an increasing number of safer devices, it is still important you know how to use and dispose of them correctly, otherwise they still pose a risk to staff and patients.

What's the Danger?

Sustaining a needlestick or sharps injury can be painful or cause a wound with the potential for localized infection, scarring, and time off work.

Exposure to bodily fluids can also lead to the healthcare worker developing illnesses such as Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, or HIV/AIDS.

Finally, a needlestick or sharps injury requires blood tests, which can cause stress and anxiety while you wait for the results. If the tests are positive, treatment is required. Depending on the illness, treatment could last several weeks or months, or in some cases be life-long.

How to Protect Yourself

4 easy ways to keep yourself safe around sharps

1. Be trained

- Know how to use specific sharp instruments correctly.
- Know how to safely discard or prepare sharp for reuse, if appropriate.
- Recognize safer needle devices and use according to instructions.

2. Discard correctly and walk away

- Never recap, bend, break or remove needles or other sharps after use.
- Discard in a sharps bin.
 - Have the bin close to where you are using the sharp.
 - Make sure the bin is not overfull.
 - Do not put your fingers into the bin.
 - Do not push or force items into the sharps bin.

3. Be needle free

- Avoid using needles where safe and effective alternatives are available, including:
 - Needleless connectors for IV delivery systems.
 - Sliding needle shields attached to disposable syringes and vacuum tube holders.
 - Needles or sharps that automatically retract into the device.
 - Self-blunting needles; and
 - Hinged or sliding shields attached to phlebotomy needles, winged-steel needles, and blood gas needles.

4. Report injury

- Complete necessary documentation.
- Get details and blood samples from patient.
- Give your own samples promptly.

- Attend follow-up sessions.

Final Word

Needlestick and sharps injuries are all too common in healthcare settings. They are a cause of pain and anxiety, though thankfully rarely serious complications. Care needs to be taken when working with sharps, including safe disposal to keep yourself, your colleagues and patients safe.