

Safe Handling & Disposal of Needles and Syringes¹

Depending on Assistance Needed, Call:	
DGS Environmental Health and Safety	202-576-8962
LEA Contact	
Other	

Situation Description

Needle-stick injuries can cause considerable anxiety because of the fear of contracting blood-borne diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C as well as other diseases such as tetanus. The risk of acquiring a disease from a needle-stick injury in a community setting is very low, however where needles/syringes are found within school premises, it is important that they are disposed of promptly and safely to ensure staff, students and others are not harmed. It is also important to know that **unsafe** disposal of needles and syringes are illegal. Regulations require that needles and syringes be disposed of in a rigid-walled, puncture-resistant, sealed container.

What are needle stick injuries and sharps?

Needle-stick injuries are wounds caused by needles that accidentally puncture the skin. Injection of blood-borne viruses is the major hazard of needle stick injuries, especially the viruses that cause AIDS (the HIV virus), hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

The term “sharps” means objects or devices with sharp points, protuberances or cutting edges that are capable of cutting or piercing the skin.

How do we prevent needle stick injuries?

Schools need to adopt practices that minimize the risk of students, staff or others coming into contact with sharps;

- Conduct regular inspection of the school grounds to ensure the early detection and disposal of discarded sharps
- Do not place your hands into areas or objects where you cannot see as sharps may be concealed there e.g. overgrown garden beds, rubbish bins. Use tongs or rubbish grabbers to pick up or move rubbish
- If students are required to pick up rubbish, provide them with suitable equipment
- Do not manually compress rubbish bags in case they contain needles/syringes.

¹ This Protocol contains information developed and implemented by District of Columbia Public Schools and can be used as a guideline for other District LEAs. Each LEA should review and edit the contents to conform to their procedures and contracts.

What if someone finds a “sharp”?

Students should never handle needles/syringes

Before staff handles sharps - move away any people (especially children) who are nearby

Ensure there is space to move and to clearly observe the sharps and your hands

Do not handle more than one item at a time. If there are multiple sharps, carefully separate them using a stick or implement – **do not** try to flick them or pick them up with a grabber/implement

The best and safest way to pick up a syringe is to use your hands, covered with thin disposable gloves that do not interfere with dexterity, and immediately wash them afterwards. The use of grabbers or other implements to pick up syringes increases the risk of injury through uncontrolled flicking of the syringe.

How do you dispose of sharps appropriately?

The aim is to transfer the needle/syringe into an appropriate container safely to minimize the risk of needle-stick injury (See Guidelines)

Recognizing a Sharps Container

A sharps container is a receptacle intended for the collection and disposal of sharps. It is:

- rigid-walled,
- puncture-proof, and
- sealable.

Do not use glass jars or bottles, plastic drink containers or aluminum drink cans. These can break or may be recycled, potentially leading to injuries to other people such as waste collectors. To minimize the risk of the sharp puncturing the container it is best to use a sharps container that complies with AS/NZS 4261:1994 - Reusable containers for the collection of sharp items used in human and animal medical applications.

Look for the following features:

- distinctive in color (yellow)
- labeled as “sharps” or “infectious waste”
- carries the biohazard and AS/NZS symbols

A designated sharps container should be made available at every school. Contact your first aid supplier.

How do schools dispose of the sharps container?

Schools should dispose of containers that contain needles/syringes via the Health Suite or a recommended facility.

When disposing of sharps:

- **Do not** dispose of sharps containers in the general waste.
- **Do not** throw needles/syringes down drains because they may then be washed out to other areas
- **Do not** throw needles/syringes down toilets

School-Based Procedures

- A visual inspection of the playgrounds, fields, walkways, gardens, and the grounds in general, is to be conducted as part of the custodian’s daily inspection of the school campus.

- Disseminate these procedures to all in the school community and train nominated people such as the Custodians in the safe handling and disposal of needles/syringes.
- Educate students regarding how to identify needles/syringes and sharps containers and what action they should take if they find these items – for example;
 1. Do not touch the syringe.
 2. One student may act as a spotter and stands near the needle/syringe to warn other students.
 3. While another student immediately reports it to a staff member.
- Inform other school and community groups that use your facilities about these procedures.
- Ensure you have sharps disposal kits at suitable locations around the school grounds, not just in the administration building. The kit should include a sharps container, disposable gloves and guidelines.
- The Custodial Staff is to conduct daily grounds inspections of the school campus and will be one of the most likely individuals to find needles/syringes and should have their own sharps containers.
- Discuss with staff to determine success or improvements to procedures.

If a needle/syringe is found at your school:

- Inform all staff, particularly custodians and nurses.
- Keep a record of where and when you found the needle/syringe.
- Ensure procedures are followed including proper disposal.

Hepatitis Vaccination

Vaccination for both Hepatitis A & B should be provided for Custodians. Vaccination costs and doctor's consultation costs should be funded by school system. As a further precaution, schools should recommend and fund hepatitis B vaccinations for other individuals who are at high risk of coming into contact with needles or syringes. (e.g. cleaning, building and grounds maintenance roles). Immunization records should be kept for each worker. Workers who are at significant risk of contact with used needles and syringes should have a blood test 4 weeks after completing the course of vaccination to ensure that they have developed adequate immunity.

Guidelines for the Disposal of Needle/Syringe into a Sharps Container

Equipment : Disposable latex, vinyl or nitrile gloves, and a sharps container

Procedure	Precautions
Step 1 Put on disposable latex or vinyl gloves (if available). Gloves will not prevent the wearer from being injured but will form a clean barrier between the hands and the syringe.	Do not attempt to recap the needle – this is how most accidental needle-stick injuries happen. The cap is usually bright orange and can be disposed of separately. Do not break, bend or otherwise try to render the syringe useless.
Step 2 Bring your rigid-walled, puncture-resistant, sealable, sharps container to the syringe.	Take the sharps container to the syringe; do not walk with the needle/syringe.
Step 3 Place the container on the ground or flat surface beside the syringe.	Do not hold the sharps container or ask another person to hold it as you are disposing of the syringe.
Step 4 Pick up the syringe by the middle of the barrel	The safest method of picking up a syringe is by hand. Staff can also chose to wear thin, disposable gloves that do not hinder dexterity. Do not crack the plastic barrel of the syringe or flick the syringe.
<i>Note Do not use a dustpan & brush to “sweep up” the syringe.</i>	<i>Plastic tweezers are not recommended as they may also cause the needle/syringe to flick into the air.</i>
Step 5 Place the syringe in the container sharp end first.	Keep the sharp end of the needle facing away from you at all times.
Step 6 Securely place the lid on the container and ensure it is sealed. Hold the container by the top when carrying.	Place the sealed container into your sharps disposal bin or contact your local council or health department regarding safe ways to dispose of your sharps container.
Step 7 Remove gloves carefully so any contaminated fluid on the glove does not come into contact with your hand. Wash your hands with running water and soap.	Other items that have come into contact with blood (i.e. gloves) should be disposed of in the same container as the used syringe or placed into double plastic bags and then into the rubbish.

What to do if a Needle Stick Injury Occurs

- Stay calm.
- Encourage the wound to bleed (gently squeeze).
- As soon as possible wash the area with running water and soap (if available).
- Apply an antiseptic and an adhesive bandage.
- As soon as possible, contact your supervisor.

It is important to be medically assessed as soon as possible. Visit your local doctor or hospital emergency department promptly; they will manage blood testing, counseling and possible hepatitis B and tetanus vaccination and/or medication.

Note: Dispose of the needle/syringe safely. Testing of syringes is usually not conducted so there is no need to keep the syringe.

Keep a copy of this page with each sharps kit in your school. This guideline should also be displayed in relevant areas within your school (e.g. Nurses Suite, Custodial Office, etc.).