

# Community Needle Stick Injuries

Injuries or pokes from discarded needles found in community settings such as parks, streets or beaches can cause concern and people are concerned about the transmission of blood-borne viruses. The following information outlines the risks of community needle stick injuries and what to do if a needle stick injury occurs.

## HOW COMMON ARE NEEDLE STICK INJURIES IN THE COMMUNITY?

The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) recommends strategies to support safe needle disposal and to reduce the number of improperly discarded needles in public places. As a result of these strategies being implemented by health authorities, municipalities, hospitals, pharmacies, harm reduction service providers and community members, community needle stick injuries are very rare.

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

When a needlestick injury occurs, concerns arise about possible exposure to blood-borne viruses, in particular, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV). The risk of getting these viruses via a community needle stick injury is extremely low. In fact, there are no documented cases of HIV infection occurring as a result of an accidental needle stick injury in the community, and if previously vaccinated for hepatitis B, the risk of HBV transmission is virtually zero. The risk of transmission of HIV, HBV and HCV via a needle stick injury acquired in a community setting is far less than in a healthcare setting due to:

- The injury does not occur immediately after needle use.
- The needle rarely contains fresh blood.
- Any virus present has been exposed to drying and environmental temperatures.
- Injuries are usually superficial.

## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM ACCIDENTALLY POKED WITH A NEEDLE?

It is understandable that getting poked by a needle can be a scary event. However, it is important to remember that the risk of infection from a community associated needle stick injury is extremely low. In the event of a needle stick injury, the following steps should be taken:

### 1. Allow the wound to bleed freely.

- Do not squeeze the wound. This may damage the tissues and increase risk of infection.

### 2. Wash the wound with soap and water.

- Do not apply bleach or alcohol to the wound.

### 3. Go to your local emergency department immediately for follow-up care.

- An assessment will be done to determine the need for post-exposure prophylaxis (e.g. medications and/or vaccinations to further reduce the risk of transmission).
- Baseline blood tests for HBV, HCV and HIV will be done at this visit, with follow-up blood tests to be done over the next three months to make sure none of these viruses have been transmitted.