

Needle Distribution

In B.C., a needle distribution policy was introduced in 2002, supported by the BC Centre for Disease Control, Ministry of Health and the Best Practice Recommendations for Canadian Harm Reduction Programs. While there is strong support for needle distribution, people may have questions about the effectiveness of needle distribution and safe needle disposal. The following information sheet aims to address these questions.

WHY IS NEEDLE DISTRIBUTION IMPORTANT?

Injection with a used needle puts people at risk of infections such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV), and other infections. Using a sterile needle and syringe for each injection is an effective way to reduce the risk of being infected with these viruses. Evidence shows that improving access to sterile needles contributes to a significant reduction in needle sharing and HIV rates, helping individuals, their families and communities to be safer and healthier.

WHY NEEDLE DISTRIBUTION AND NOT NEEDLE EXCHANGE?

In the past, some needle exchange programs required people to trade (or exchange) their used needles for sterile needles. However, this practice is outdated and unsatisfactory as evidence shows that limiting the number of needles distributed increases the likelihood of people sharing or re-using needles, and thus increases the risk of HIV, HBV, HCV and other infections. Strict exchange policies, such as "one-for-one", are not necessary to achieve high needle return rates, and they can reduce the effectiveness of needle distribution programs. A review of international needle distribution programs found the overall needle return rate was 90%.

The BC Harm Reduction Strategies and Services recommends that clients receive enough needles to be able to use a new one for each injection, and encourages agencies to provide supplies for peer-to-peer distribution to reach people who may not be able to use harm reduction supply distribution sites for any reason.

WHY IS SAFE NEEDLE DISPOSAL IMPORTANT?

People do not intend to harm others by discarding used needles, but rather they need an easy way to dispose of needles safely. The safe disposal of used needles prevents re-using and sharing of needles, as well as limits the number of discarded needles in the community. While community needle stick injuries are rare, it is in everyone's best interest to support needle distribution programs.

Harm reduction programs, which distribute sterile needles, play a key role in needle recovery and disposal through community and staff education, as well as:

- Distribution of small sharps containers for personal use.
- Accepting used sharps back for disposal.
- Providing safe needle disposal education to people who use drugs and other community members.
- Conducting regular sweeps of the areas in which they operate.