Safe Sharps Disposal
Toolkit

A Community Response to a Community Issue

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# Table of Contents

Purpose of this Toolkit ............................................................................................................... 3

It Takes a Team .......................................................................................................................... 3

What is Harm Reduction? .......................................................................................................... 5

Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) ........................................................................................ 6

Recommended Roles and Responsibilities for Engaged Stakeholders ...................................... 6

What are the Risks? .................................................................................................................... 7

Who is at Risk? .......................................................................................................................... 8

Unsafe Sharps Disposal .............................................................................................................. 9

DO’s and DON’T’s of Safe Sharps Disposal .............................................................................. 10

Where to Dispose of Sharps ..................................................................................................... 11

Appendix 1 - Infections ............................................................................................................ 13

Appendix 2 - Picture Glossary .................................................................................................. 14

Appendix 3 - Distribution vs Exchange .................................................................................... 15
Safe Sharps Disposal Toolkit

A Community Response to a Community Issue

Purpose of this Toolkit

First and foremost, thank you for taking the time to read this toolkit. Our communities are something that we value and by taking the time to go over this toolkit, you are showing that you also care about the well-being of your community.

There is often concern of improperly discarded needles in public spaces. This is an ongoing challenge in many communities that requires multiple stakeholders to engage in order to create change.

This toolkit was created to be used by health authorities, municipalities, and local agencies in collaboration to manage the issue of discarded sharps. We wish to provide education, direction, and resources on the roles that community partners play in sharps collections in the community, as well as general knowledge on what to do if you ever come across a sharp yourself.

It Takes a Team

People use needles for a variety of reasons. Some medical conditions require people to use needles, such as diabetes, cancer or arthritis; others may use needles for medication to manage pain. People also use needles to inject illegal drugs.

When needles are discarded improperly in a community it is often a result of not having a place to properly dispose of them. Most people will dispose of needles safely if safe choices are made available.
For people who inject illicit drugs, the ability to properly dispose of syringes and needles can be influenced by social (e.g., access to housing) and individual (e.g., physical disability) factors. It may be the inability to find locations for disposal, lack of knowledge and awareness of proper practices, or not enough public disposal units. For people experiencing homelessness this issue is made even more difficult and hours of disposal centers may also not be the same as the using hours of people who inject drugs (PWID) (CATIE, 2015). While it may seem like police enforcement may improve the odds of people properly disposing of needles it has been found that this is the exact opposite. Fear of identification, and being caught with drug paraphernalia will often times cause people who use drugs (PWUD) to quickly dispose of needles and syringes. Even when police are referring people to a Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) it has been found that police can still be a barrier to safe disposal.

If improperly discarded sharps are something your community is experiencing a collaborative community response is recommended. Stakeholder collaboration should include representation from local health authority, community-based organizations, local government (i.e. bylaw or parks and recreation), people who use drugs (PWUD) and local businesses. For further information on community working or task groups, please see Harm Reduction: A British Columbia Community Guide.

In addition, stakeholders from other areas of the community are important to the success of a safe sharps disposal program. Other roles the community could assist with include:

**Community Sharps Management**

NSPs in the community need to build a strong rapport between themselves, the public and the clients. NSPs can assist with safe sharps disposal through: conducting regular sweeps of the areas in which they operate, providing education on safe disposal to PWID, providing access and distribution of individual sharps containers and accepting used sharps back for disposal.

**Promotion of Sharps Disposal**

NSPs, municipalities and health authorities should all promote the benefits of NSPs and safe sharps disposal. Education can be provided through: one on one counseling, distribution of posters and pamphlets, information stickers on equipment and sharps containers, and encouraging PWIDs to promote safe practices among their peers.

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Health authorities and community based agencies providing harm reduction services should ensure the return of used supplies is made available to PWID.

**Education Regarding Unsafe Sharps Disposal**

Education should be provided regarding unsafe disposal practices such as discarded syringes in public places, discarding in garbage and recycling, or flushing them down the toilet. Please see the ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ of Safe Sharp Disposal for further information.

**Pharmacy Sharps Disposal**

The Canadian Pharmacist Association (2017) states that, “Pharmacists are well-positioned to promote safe medication and sharps disposal.” Pharmacists could participate in the safe disposal of injection equipment, distribution of new containers and equipment and education provision to the client.

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**What is Harm Reduction?**

Harm Reduction is an umbrella term used to describe programs, policies and practices that aim to reduce the negative consequences associated with behaviours that are typically considered high risk. In this context those behaviours include drug use and unprotected sexual activity. The BC Centre of Disease Control (BCCDC) defines Harm Reduction as a set of

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supports and services that aim to “enhance the knowledge, skills, resources, and supports for individuals, families and communities to be safer and healthier”.

Harm Reduction includes a range of health interventions to reduce harms and improve health outcomes associated with substance use and sexual health for both individuals and communities. These health interventions are targeted at substance use, addiction, overdose, Sexually Transmitted and Blood Borne Infections (STBBIs), as well as, other illness and injuries, social isolation, violence, oppression, trauma, and criminal justice system involvement.

Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs)

The HIV/AIDS epidemic had a significant impact, both in Canada and worldwide, on the development of harm reduction services, such as needle and syringe programs. In order to curb the transmission of this disease, often contracted through shared needles, NSPs offer a safe place for people to access sterile supplies. This decreases the likelihood of sharing supplies, which can affect the overall rate of HIV and Hepatitis C in a given community. Over many decades, research has proven that the distribution of harm reduction supplies for injection drug use has extensive benefits to both communities and individuals (See Benefits of NSPs).

Recommended Roles and Responsibilities for Engaged Stakeholders

**Harm Reduction Distribution Partners:**

- Sites distributing harm reduction supplies, whether health authority or contracted agencies, should provide options for disposal of used needles and other related supplies through their program. This includes making available individual sharps containers and encouraging all used needles to be returned in that format.

- Whenever possible, include peers (people with lived experience) at meetings pertaining to community sharps issues. Peers can have

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valuable insight into where public disposal units should be located and how to best message to the population of people who inject drugs in a community⁵.

**Municipal Partners:**

- Municipalities who participate in the stakeholder meetings are encouraged to implement community sharps disposal boxes in areas where discarded needles are frequently found.

- Cost of the initial installation of disposal boxes and ongoing maintenance, monitoring, and replacing can be covered by local municipalities.

- Full sharps containers/boxes can be disposed of through Stericycle contracts covered by the health authority⁶.

- Municipalities are encouraged to place information on their local websites with direction on how and where to dispose of sharps in the community.

**Community Partners and Engaged Stakeholders:**

- Community based organizations participating in the stakeholder meetings are encouraged to get involved in collection of used needles and other drug use supplies. **Examples may include:**
  - Allowing for a sharps disposal box to be placed inside or outside of their building if indicated.
  - Participating in and/or supporting organized community clean up events.

**What are the Risks?** ⁷,⁸

**Blood Borne Illnesses (BBI)**

We all know that washing our hands is a great way to prevent germs and infection. We also know that picking up other people’s garbage and using other people’s personal items is an easy way to spread germs and infections too. Being exposed to another person’s needle or sharp could

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⁵ Please review and follow Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices before bringing peers to the table

⁶ Connect with your local Harm Reduction Coordinator for more information at harmreduction.coordinator@interiorhealth.ca


lead to an infection. Some possible infections you may be exposed to are:

- HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)
- Hepatitis C
- Hepatitis B

For more information on these infections please see *Appendix 1.*

**Who is at Risk?**

Without proper education or access to a safe disposal option, people who use needles and other sharps may leave them in the garbage or on the ground. Picking up other people’s garbage with bare hands is not a safe idea and this includes needles.

**Different ways to be exposed:**

- Children playing and exploring local trails and parks find a needle
- Someone looking through garbage’s for bottles
- A park maintenance person
- A ‘Good Samaritan’ who finds a needle and carries it with them to find a safe place to dispose of it, or tries to re-cap it.
- City workers such as a waste disposal worker may get poked by needles hidden in garbage bags
- A housekeeper or janitor cleaning washrooms
Unsafe Sharps Disposal

Putting Needles in the Garbage

*Why is it Unsafe?*

- Workers who collect the garbage may accidently get poked when collecting waste.
- People who go through garbage may get poked.

Putting Needles in the Recycling

*Why is it Unsafe?*

- Workers usually sort the bottles by hand and can easily get poked by a needle.
- Volunteers may sort and collect bottles for fundraisers or other events.

Flushing Needles Down The Toilet Or Down The Drain

*Why Is It Unsafe?*

- Needles may plug toilets. When plumbers come to do maintenance, they could get poked.
- Toilets and drains lead to sewers, where workers and city staff could get poked.
- It’s environmentally unfriendly.

Tossing Needles On The Ground

*Why Is It Unsafe?*

- Children or adults may find them under bushes or on the ground and get poked.
- City workers or park maintenance crews could get poked.
- Pets or animals may find them and poke themselves.
DO’s and DON’T’s of Safe Sharps Disposal

**DO’s**

- **DO**  Place used needles and other sharps in a sharps disposal container or in a used laundry detergent container with a lid (and label ‘Household Sharps’, do not recycle) to reduce the risk of needle-sticks, cuts or punctures from loose sharps.

- **DO**  Keep all needles and other sharps and sharps disposal containers out of reach of children and pets.

- **DO**  Pick up sharps with latex gloves, tweezers or tongs. Never with your bare hands.

- **DO**  Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after disposal.

- **DO**  Always point the needle or sharp part away from you.

- **DO**  Call for help if you feel uncomfortable or if you need it.

**DON’Ts**

- **DON’T**  Throw sharps in the trash.

- **DON’T**  Flush sharps down the toilet.

- **DON’T**  Throw needles on the ground.

- **DON’T**  Put sharps in your recycling bin.

- **DON’T**  Try to remove, bend, break or recap needles used by another person. This can lead to accidental needle sticks, which may cause serious infections.

- **DON’T**  Attempt to remove the needle without knowing the proper steps to pick up and dispose of sharps safely. If unsure, see the resources section of this Tool Kit.

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If you get poked by a sharp:

- Immediately wash the area with soap and water
- Allow the wound to bleed freely
- Do not squeeze the wound area as this can cause tissue damage and increase the uptake of the pathogen
- Do not wash the area with antiseptics or bleach as this can damage the healthy tissue
- Go to your nearest emergency room immediately to seek health care attention
Where to Dispose of Sharps
If you find the sharp on a public area or park, you can call your local municipality or community agency and have someone come and collect the sharp. Alternatively, you can follow the directions on the next page to dispose of the needle yourself.

Local Public Health Units or your local Mental Health and Substance Use Centre will take back supplies from harm reduction clients.

Some pharmacies will accept sharps containers for disposal. Please call your local pharmacy to ask about disposal options.

Local resources you can call:
- Downtown Kelowna Association
  250-470-9058
- Outreach Urban Health, Kelowna
  250-868-2230
- Boys & Girls Club, Williams Lake
  250-392-5730
- ASK Wellness, Kamloops
  250-376-7558
- Community Ambassador Program - Kamloops
  250-572-3008 or 250-572-3009
- Downtown Kamloops Association
  250-372-3242
- ASK Wellness, Merritt
  250-315-0098
- Cammy LaFleur Street Clinic, Vernon
  250-545-3572
- Downtown Primary Care Centre, Vernon
  250-541-1097
- ANKORS, Nelson
  250-505-5506
- ANKORS, Cranbrook
  250-426-3383
Note: This page is a poster.
Print this page, cut on the dotted line, and place in a visible area.

SAFE DISPOSAL
of needles and drug paraphernalia

Anyone using a needle to inject should dispose of it safely. However, that’s not always the case, and sometimes discarded needles and drug paraphernalia are found in public areas. Safe disposal saves others from getting hurt accidentally.

SAFE NEEDLE DISPOSAL

• Do not try to replace the cap on the needle, snap, break or bend the needle.
• Pick up needle using work or latex gloves and tongs or tweezers, holding needle point away from you.
• Put the needle in a metal or hard plastic container that has a lid, such as a product or drink bottle.
• Replace cap on container firmly and label it.
• Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.
• Drop off the sealed container at your local health unit or at a community drop box.

SAFE DRUG PARAPHERNALIA DISPOSAL

• Pick up paraphernalia—such as cookers, stems or pipes using work or latex gloves.
• Dispose of drug paraphernalia into a garbage or a sharps container.
• Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.

IF YOU ARE PRICKED BY A NEEDLE

• Quickly wash the pricked area with soap and warm water.
• Go to your nearest emergency room for immediate medical attention.

Adapted from Vancouver Island Health Authority
Appendix 1 - Infections

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

What Causes HIV?
HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system, making it easier to develop infections. HIV kills blood cells which are critical to fighting infection.

How Can You Get HIV?
HIV is found in body fluids like semen, vaginal secretions, blood, and breast milk. HIV cannot survive outside the body and is spread through unprotected sex and by sharing needles.

Treatment
Currently there is no cure for HIV. However, you can slow down the progression and control the symptoms of HIV through antiretroviral medications.

Prevention
You can reduce the risk of spreading or acquiring HIV infection by:
- Engaging in safe sex practices such as wearing condoms
- By always using new injection equipment, never sharing with others

Hepatitis

What Causes Hepatitis?
Hepatitis is a disease of the liver, caused by a virus. There are many different types of Hepatitis.

How Can You Get Hepatitis?
Hepatitis A is spread through food or water contaminated by feces.
Hepatitis B is spread through blood and body fluids, similar to HIV.
Hepatitis C is primarily spread through coming into contact with an infected person's blood. Most people become infected through sharing needles to inject drugs. You can also become infected through needle stick injuries, but the risk is very low.

Treatment
Vaccinations are available for Hepatitis A & B
There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C. Some people will clear Hepatitis C infection on their own. Others will need to undergo treatment with several medications.

Prevention
You can reduce the risk of spreading or acquiring a Hepatitis infection by:
- By always using new injection equipment
- Never sharing personal items, such as razors or toothbrushes
- Good hand hygiene
Appendix 2 - Picture Glossary

Syringes and needles are used to inject medications for certain conditions, like diabetes. They are also used to inject illicit drugs.

A lancet is used by people with diabetes. It is a very small needle used to prick the finger and test a small amount of blood. This is often done several times a day or week.

A crack pipe is a device used to consume crack cocaine. Crack pipes should be disposed of in a garbage or a sharps container.
NEWEL DISTRIBUTION VS EXCHANGE

Background

The use of sterile needles and syringes, free from microorganisms for injecting drugs has long been accepted to be an effective means in reducing the incidence of blood borne pathogens such as HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. The BC harm reduction distribution policy was introduced in 2002 and is supported by the BC Harm Reduction and Strategies and Services (HRSS) committee guidelines and Best Practice Recommendations for Canadian Harm Reduction programs. Efforts have thus shifted from one-for-one needle exchange to the implementation of needle distribution and safe disposal of used injection supplies. However, despite public support for needle distribution, the public has questions about the efficacy of needle distribution and the proper disposal of needles. The term ‘needle’ is used to include needles and the attached syringe. This information sheet aims to address these concerns and provides evidence to support needle distribution.

Why needle distribution and not exchange?

The BC HRSS has promoted needle distribution since 2002. The Canadian Best Practice recommendations considers needle exchange to be “outdated and unsatisfactory”. Limiting the number of needles distributed increases the tendency for clients to share and re-use the same drug injection equipment and thus increases the risk of transmission of HIV, hepatitis C and other infections. A policy of exchange reduces the effectiveness of a needle/syringe program and has devastating effects on public health. On the contrary, less restrictive policies with more syringe coverage has been shown to lower the likelihood of re-using, and sharing and transmission of blood borne pathogens. The HRSS guidelines state that clients should receive enough syringes to be able to use a new one for each injection; it also encourages agencies to promote distribution for secondary purposes in order to reach people who may not use the harm reduction distribution sites.

Why is safe needle disposal important?

The safe disposal of used needles prevents re-using and sharing of needles, and also prevents community exposure to needles. Seeing discarded needles in the community can cause distress. However community needle stick injuries are rare and carry a negligible risk of hepatitis C transmission and there have been no reported HIV transmission from needle injuries in the community. People do not intend to harm others by discarding used needles but need an easy way to dispose of them safely.

Harm reduction programs help to remove most potentially infectious syringes from the community. It achieves this through community and staff education. The BC HRSS provides personal sharps containers; communities provide publicly accessible community needle drop boxes, needle disposal advice for the public, and pick-up of discarded drug injection equipment. Regular reviews with the Health Authority and other agencies should assess for compliance with regulations and monitor for the numbers returned and incidences of inappropriately discarded syringes. A review of international programs found the overall needle return rate was 90%.

Going forward

Needle distribution and encouraging safe disposal helps facilitate the use of sterile equipment for each injection, reduce transmission of blood borne pathogens and promote less discriminatory practice. Promoting public and staff awareness to support the work of the harm reduction programs and agencies will enable individuals, their families and communities to be safer and healthier.

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