

## Frequently Asked Questions

### —Needle Distribution Programs—

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#### **Why does Interior Health distribute free needles?**

- Needle distribution plays an important role in the health and wellbeing of everyone in our communities. Needle distribution programs are a province-wide, evidence-based way to reduce the risk of infections in our communities.
- When people inject with a used needle they are at risk of blood-borne infections like HIV, Hepatitis B and C viruses and other infections. In order to effectively reduce the risk, it is important that a new and sterile needle is used for each injection.
- Needle distribution programs provide access to sterile needles, reduce sharing and as a result have helped to reduce rates of illnesses, including Hepatitis C and HIV. Since 2005, the number of cases of HIV diagnosed among people who inject drugs in B.C. has declined by 86 per cent.
- Needle distribution programs across British Columbia are not new. 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. All B.C. Health Authorities distribute needles.

#### **Ok, I get that, but why does Interior Health give out so many needles?**

- In order to effectively prevent infection people who inject drugs should use a new, sterile needle every time they inject. Many people who inject substances need to do so several times a day. Our best available data for the province estimates that there are approximately 7000 people who inject drugs in Interior Health area communities.

#### **If I am not a person who injects drugs how does needle distribution help me?**

- Low rates of blood borne infections benefit the entire community. Health care costs are reduced - it much less expensive to prevent blood-borne infections than treat them. There is less demand on the health care system and a much lower chance of other people becoming infected.
- Blood-borne infections can be transmitted when blood or body fluid from an infected person enters another person's body. This can happen through activities other than injection drug use. People who inject drugs are members of our communities and come from all “walks of life” – they may be your co-workers, your sex partners, your neighbours – by reducing the rates of blood-borne infections among people who inject drugs it helps reduce the risk of transmission in the larger community.

### **Why doesn't Interior Health require people to exchange needles for new ones – a one for one approach?**

- Needle exchange is not best practice and as a result B.C. moved away from that model in 2002. Evidence shows that limiting the number of needles distributed increases the likelihood of people sharing or re-using needles, and that increases the risk of infections.
- Needle exchange policies, such as a one-for-one system or trading a used needle for a new one create barriers that actually decrease the effectiveness of needle distribution programs and they are not necessary to achieve high rates of proper disposal.

### **Fair enough, then why aren't programs distributing retractable needles?**

- Retractable needles do not work well for people who inject drugs and may actually put them at risk of infections, injury and overdose
- We are currently dealing with a public health overdose emergency, where we have seen an unprecedented number of people die from illicit drug overdoses. One of the key overdose prevention messages during this time is to recommend people who use substances use smaller amounts, possibly a test dose. This is difficult to do using retractable needles. In addition, people who use drugs in BC have said they would not use these types of needles for a number of other reasons – this would result in low uptake for needle distribution programs which can lead to an increase in the spread of infections.
- Retractable needles are also more expensive than regular syringes, which would increase health care costs.

### **Sometimes these needles end up on the ground in our community. What is the risk if I or someone I care about gets poked?**

- No one likes to see needles lying on the ground in the community. Fortunately, the risk of getting sick from a community needle poke is very rare. Remember, needle distribution programs help reduce the likelihood that a needle on the ground will contain blood-borne viruses and even if a virus was present, most of them don't live very long in a syringe in the outdoor elements. However, if you or someone you know does get poked, it's still important to go to the doctor as soon as possible and have it checked out.

### **What is Interior Health doing to make sure needles are disposed of safely?**

- It's not just Interior Health, reducing the number of needles that end up on the ground is something that many people in the community work hard at including community agencies, municipal governments, people who use drugs, and more. It's very important to all of us and we often work together.
- Here are some of the things Interior Health is doing:
  - Providing personal sharps containers when needles are given out.
  - Providing safe needle disposal education to people who use drugs and other community members.

- Accepting used needles at all public health, mental health and substance use, and primary care sites.
- Covering the cost of harm reduction sharps disposal for non-profits and local governments.
- Providing large industrial sharps bins for local governments to install in hot-spot areas.
- Supporting community partner agencies to conduct community clean ups.

**Is there something the residents of my community can do to help?**

- Absolutely – we can all do our part. Here are a few ideas:
  - Learn about what to do if you find a needle.
  - Visit our website or your local government website to learn about what is available in your area for disposal boxes, needle pick up services and community sharps strategies.
  - Organize a community clean up – your local health centre can help with supplies needed like containers.
  - Learn about stigma – the more we judge, shame and talk disrespectfully about people who inject drugs, the more we drive them into the shadows – making them less likely to access health care services and options for safe needle disposal.

For more information:

<https://www.interiorhealth.ca/YourEnvironment/HarmReduction/Pages/Safe-Needle-Disposal.aspx>