

# Harm Reduction Best Practices: Safe Needle Disposal

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Teaching people how to safely get rid of used needles<sup>a</sup> and making sure there are enough places to do it safely can help reduce the number of needles left in public spaces. This information sheet shares evidence-based ways to improve needle disposal in communities, along with instructions for safely handling and disposing of a found used needle.

## Community ways to make needle disposal safer

Many people in communities use needles. They include people with diabetes or other medical conditions, pet owners, and people who use substances. When used needles are left in public spaces, it is often because there are not enough places to throw them away<sup>1</sup>. People are not typically trying to hurt others – they just need disposal options that are easy to find and safe to use.

Needle distribution programs give out sterile needles and other harm reduction supplies to people who use substances. They also help keep needle disposal safe by:

- Giving out small sharps disposal containers for personal use,
- Taking back used needles for safe disposal,
- Teaching people who use substances and other community members how to safely dispose of needles,
- Doing regular sweeps to pick up used needles in the areas they serve.

Studies show that when a needle distribution program starts in a community, the number of needles left in public places does not go up, and might actually go down<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

## Ways communities can make needle disposal safer

Evidence-based ways to improve safe needle disposal in communities include:

- Putting sharps disposal containers in public washroom stalls,
- Place sharps disposal containers and community drop boxes where discarded needles are often found in public,
- Start a community needle distribution program if there isn't one already,
- Include pharmacies in disposal programs, whenever possible<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>a</sup> Needle refers to a loose needle or a needle with an attached syringe.

- Keep harm reduction supply sites open for longer hours<sup>6</sup>,
- Open overdose prevention sites in communities where they're needed <sup>7</sup>.

## How to safely dispose of a needle found in public

If you find a needle in a public place, call 8-1-1 to connect with your local health unit and ask about collection options. If you need to dispose of it yourself, follow these steps:

### How to safely dispose of a discarded needle:

1. **Find a thick plastic container:** Use a sharps container if you have one. They are available free at public health units. You can also use a thick plastic bottle with a lid (like a shampoo or bleach bottle). Do not use drink containers - they have a deposit, and someone might try to recycle them.
2. **Pick up the needle safely:** Wear gloves or use tongs. Pick up the needle by the middle of the syringe barrel. Do not recap the needle or break off the end. Always keep the sharp end pointed down and away from you.
3. **Dispose of the needle:** Bring the container close to the needle. Put the container on the ground - do not hold it in your hand. Put the needle in the container, sharp end first, and secure the lid.
4. **Clean up:** Remove gloves if you are wearing them and wash your hands with soap and water.

**Drop the container with the needle off at a collection site:** Take the sealed container to a health unit, harm reduction site, pharmacy, or community drop box. While you're there, you can ask for a personal sharps container. Remember, once a plastic bottle has syringes in it, it can't be recycled.

**If you used tongs:** Clean them with a bleach solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water after the needle is safely discarded.

**Messaging for children and people with support needs:** Teach children and adults with support needs to never to touch a needle if they find one. Tell them to find an adult or support person right away so it can be safely cleaned up.

A list of harm reduction supply distribution and collection sites in your area can be found on [Toward the Heart](#).

To learn more about Harm Reduction please visit: [Toward the Heart](#) or the [Harm Reduction page](#) of the BCCDC website for a comprehensive list of publications, reports, and other resources.

## References

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