

Safe Needle Disposal

Access to community sites and public education for safe needle* disposal can decrease the number of publically discarded needles. This information sheet outlines evidence-based strategies to improve needle disposal in communities as well as instructions for the safe handling and disposal of a discarded needle.

Community strategies for safe needle disposal

Needles are used by a wide range of community members, including people with diabetes or other medical conditions, pet owners, and people who use illicit substances. Publically discarded needles are often a result of having limited places for proper needle disposal¹. People do not intend to harm others by discarding used needles, but rather need an easy way to dispose of them safely. Studies show that after a needle distribution program opens in a community, the number of observed needles discarded in public places does not increase, and might actually decline^{2,3,4}.

Needle distribution programs distribute sterile needles and other harm reduction supplies for people who use drugs. They play a key role in safe needle disposal by:

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

How communities can improve safe needle disposal

Evidence-based strategies to improve safe needle disposal within communities include:

- Install sharps disposal containers in public washroom stalls.
- Provide sharps disposal containers/community drop boxes in areas where improper disposal of needles is observed.
- Implement a community Needle Distribution Program if one does not already exist.
- Include pharmacies in disposal programs whenever possible⁵.
- Increase the operating hours of harm reduction supply distribution and collection sites⁶.
- Establish overdose prevention sites in communities where appropriate⁷.

How to safely dispose of a publically discarded needle

If a discarded needle is found in a public place, connect with a local health unit by calling 8.1.1 (or the needle pick-up hotline if located in Vancouver at 604.657.6561) to find out about collection options. Alternatively, the following steps should be taken to safely dispose of the needle:

1. Find a thick plastic container with a secure lid (e.g., plastic drink bottle with a wide mouth, liquid laundry bottle, etc.).
 - Remove the lid and place the container on the ground beside the needle.
2. Wearing gloves or using tongs, pick up the needle by the centre of the syringe barrel with care.
 - Work or latex gloves can be used.
 - Do not break or recap the needle.
 - Always point the sharp end of the needle down and away from you.
3. Put the needle in the container, sharp-end first, and secure the lid.
 - While doing this step, the container should be on the ground; do not hold it in your hand.
4. Remove gloves (if used) and wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.
5. Drop-off the sealed container at a local health unit, harm reduction site, pharmacy, or community drop box.

*The term 'needle' refers to either a loose needle or a needle with an attached syringe.

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

References

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