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OSHA[®] FactSheet

Protecting Yourself When Handling Contaminated Sharps

Sharps are objects that can penetrate a worker's skin, such as needles, scalpels, broken glass, capillary tubes and the exposed ends of dental wires. If blood or other potentially infectious materials (OPIM), as defined in the OSHA Bloodborne Pathogens standard (29 CFR 1910.1030), are present or may be present on the sharp, it is a contaminated sharp and appropriate personal protective equipment must be worn.

A needlestick or a cut from a contaminated sharp can result in a worker being infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV), and other blood-borne pathogens. The standard specifies measures to reduce these types of injuries and the risk of infection.

Careful handling of contaminated sharps can prevent injury and reduce the risk of infection. Employers must ensure that workers follow these work practices to decrease the workers' chances of contracting bloodborne diseases.

Safer Medical Devices

Employers are required to consider and use safer medical devices, wherever possible. These devices include those that are needleless or have built-in protection to guard workers against contact with the contaminated sharp. In addition, employers must ask non-managerial patient care workers who could be exposed to contaminated sharps injuries for their input in identifying, evaluating and selecting effective work practice and engineering controls, including safer medical devices. The employer must document consideration and implementation of these devices, and the solicitation of worker input, in the Exposure Control Plan.

Prompt Disposal

Employers must also ensure that contaminated sharps are disposed of in sharps disposal containers immediately or as soon as feasible after use. Sharps disposal containers must be readily accessible and located as close as feasible to the area where sharps will be used. In some cases, they may be placed on carts to prevent patients, such

as psychiatric patients or children, from accessing the sharps. Containers also must be available wherever sharps may be found, such as in laundries.

Contaminated sharps must never be sheared or broken. Recapping, bending, or removing needles is permissible only if there is no feasible alternative or if such actions are required for a specific medical or dental procedure. If recapping, bending, or removal is necessary, employers must ensure that workers use either a mechanical device or a one-handed technique. The cap must not be held in one hand while guiding the sharp into it or placing it over the sharp. A one-handed "scoop" technique uses the needle itself to pick up the cap, and then the cap is pushed against a hard surface to ensure a tight fit onto the device. Also, the cap may be held with tongs or forceps and placed over the needle. Contaminated broken glass must not be picked up by hand, but must be cleaned up using mechanical means, such as a brush and dust pan, tongs, or forceps.

Sharps Containers

Containers for contaminated sharps must be puncture-resistant. The sides and the bottom must be leakproof. They must be appropriately labeled or color-coded red to warn everyone that the contents are hazardous. Containers for disposable sharps must be closable (that is, have a lid, flap, door, or other means of closing the container), and they must be kept upright to keep the sharps and any liquids from spilling out of the container.

The containers must be replaced routinely and not be overfilled, which can increase the risk of needlesticks or cuts. Sharps disposal containers that are reusable must not be opened, emptied,

or cleaned manually or in any other manner that would expose workers to the risk of sharps injury. Employers also must ensure that reusable sharps that are contaminated are not stored or processed in a manner that requires workers to reach by hand into the containers where these sharps have been placed.

Handling Containers

Before sharps disposal containers are removed or replaced, they must be closed to prevent spilling the contents. If there is a chance of leakage from the disposal container, the employer must ensure that it is placed in a secondary container that is closable, appropriately labeled or color-coded red, and constructed to contain all contents and prevent leakage during handling, storage, transport, or shipping.

Additional Information

For more information, go to OSHA's Bloodborne Pathogens and Needlestick Prevention Safety and Health Topics web page at: <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/bloodbornepathogens/index.html>.

To file a complaint by phone, report an emergency, or get OSHA advice, assistance, or products, contact your nearest OSHA office under the "U.S. Department of Labor" listing in your phone book, or call us toll-free at (800) 321-OSHA (6742).

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999; teletypewriter (TTY) number: (877) 889-5627.

For assistance, contact us. We can help. It's confidential.

