



Sharps Health & Safety Information

Definition of sharps

Sharps are items that can cause cuts or puncture injuries and include:

- needles
- scalpels
- stitch cutters
- razor blades
- glass ampoules
- sharp instruments
- spicules of bone and teeth.

Injuries sustained by sharps are second only to back injuries as a cause of occupational injury to healthcare workers.

All sharps waste must be disposed of carefully in appropriate containers that comply to [BS 7320](#), United Nations Standard 3291, or their equivalent, and according to local policies on safe working practices

Sharps containing substances that were wholly or partially discharged should be disposed of into a designated **RED LID** sharps plastic container.

Under the new [Hazardous Waste Regulations](#) (2005), sharps must be disposed of into a designated plastic containers clearly marked with the appropriate label quoting the [European Waste Catalogue](#) (EWC) 6 digit code number and colour coded as:

- **absolute entries* hazardous waste regardless of any threshold concentrations**
- mirror entries* hazardous waste only if dangerous substances are present above threshold concentrations
- non-hazardous waste.

Those EWC relating to healthcare sharps disposal include:

- 18 01 01 sharps (except 18 01 03)
- **18 01 03* wastes whose collection and disposal is subject to special requirements in order to prevent infection**
- **18 01 08* cytotoxic and cytostatic medicines**
- 18 01 09 medicines other than those mentioned in 18 01 08.

Different types of hazardous waste should not be mixed together except where it is not possible to segregate waste. A permit from the Environmental Agency is required to allow this to happen

Sharps disposal

Numerous guidance documents have been issued by the Department of Health, Health and Safety Executive and professional associations on the safe handling and disposal of sharps. Current evidence supports the following guidance when using or disposing of sharps:

- do not pass sharps directly from hand to hand and keep the handling of sharps to a minimum
- do not bend or break needles before or after use
- always dispose of sharps immediately at the point of use into an appropriate container 'a use it bin it' policy
- don't re-sheath needles
- don't separate syringes/cartridges and needles, they should be disposed of in one piece
- all sharps containers must comply with BS 7320: 1990 Specification for Sharps containers, United Nations Standard 3291, or their equivalent
- when assembling sharps containers follow the manufacturer's instructions and complete the label appropriately
- don't fill sharps containers more than two-thirds full or above the manufacturer's marked line
- close the sharps container in between use using the temporary closure mechanism
- lock the sharps container when ready for final disposal according to the manufacturer's instructions
- used sharps containers should always be carried by the handle
- don't dispose of sharps with other clinical waste
- don't put used sharps containers into yellow/orange bags for disposal
- if a used sharps container is damaged place it into a large secure rigid container and label it appropriately
- used sharps containers should be stored in a secure, locked area away from the public until they are collected for appropriate disposal.

All sharps waste must be disposed of properly, such waste must only be removed and disposed of by a registered, authorised waste carrier.

The Department of Health has published the 'essential steps to safe, clean care'. This is a delivery programme which aims to reduce healthcare associated infections, including MRSA. The 'essential steps' programme provides tools and guidance to support different organisations and settings, including residential and nursing homes, as they work towards reducing and eradicating healthcare associated infections.

As part of the 'essential steps to safe, clean care' programme, the Department of Health has launched a specific step relating to preventing the spread of infection. The aim of this document is to reduce the risk of microbial contamination in everyday practice and to ensure there is a managed environment that minimises the risk of infection to patients, clients, staff and visitor.

Sharps injuries

Injuries sustained by sharps are second only to back injuries as a cause of occupational injury to healthcare workers. To reduce the risk of exposure to blood borne viruses, sharps must be disposed of correctly according to local health and safety policy.

Some procedures that involve intravascular cannulation, venepuncture and injection have a higher risk of injuries associated with them. Devices used for such procedures include:

- IV cannulae
- winged steel butterfly needles
- needles and syringes
- phlebotomy needles.

There is a legal requirement for employers to maintain records of accidents to staff. Should a worker acquire HIV or HBV at work they are considered to be eligible for industrial injury compensation. The importance of accurate record keeping at the time of the injury is essential in such circumstances. For further information visit the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations ([RIDDOR website](#)).

All healthcare workers should be aware of their local policy should they sustain a sharps injury or exposure to blood or body fluids.

First aid for such injuries include:

- for needle stick, cuts, bites or scratches
 - encourage bleeding by squeezing
 - wash thoroughly with soap and water
 - cover with a waterproof dressing
- splashes to the mouth or eyes should be rinsed thoroughly with running water
- inform your manager immediately
- complete an accident/incident form
- report to the Occupational Health Department (OHD)
- out of working hours when the OHD is closed, attend the A&E Department for further advice
- It is the responsibility of the healthcare worker involved and his or her manager to make sure this procedure is followed.

Information on the surveillance of significant occupational exposures to blood borne viruses in healthcare workers can be found on the Health Protection Agency website.

