

# Protecting Yourself When Handling Contaminated Sharps

Sharps are objects that can penetrate a worker's skin, such as needles, scalpels, broken glass, etc. If blood or other potentially infectious material may be present on the sharp, it is a contaminated sharp and should be treated accordingly.

## 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, non-managerial employees who could be exposed must be asked 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

- Contaminated sharps must be disposed of in sharps disposal containers immediately or as soon as possible.
- Sharps disposal containers must be easy to access and kept near where sharps will be used.
- 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 it's required for a specific procedure.
- If it is necessary, workers must use either a mechanical device or a one-handed technique. 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.
- Contaminated broken glass must not be picked up by hand. Instead use mechanical means, such as a brush and dust pan, tongs, or forceps.

## Sharp Containers

- Containers for contaminated sharps must be puncture-resistant.
- The sides and the bottom must be leak proof.
- They must be appropriately labeled or color-coded red to warn everyone that the contents are hazardous.
- Containers for disposable sharps must be closable, 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.
- 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.

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