



# Hidden threat

**Don't be caught off guard  
by discarded needles**

**WORK SAFE BC**

WORKING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE



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**Health care workers are routinely educated about the risks of needlestick injuries, but workers in other sectors can be caught off guard by discarded needles — sometimes found in unexpected places.**

Municipal workers use gloves and special containers to safely remove discarded needles — or “sharps” — from public spaces.

By Anne-Rachelle McHugh

**M**ost workers outside of the health care industry rarely give any thought to the risk of injuries from used syringes. But a skin puncture from a needle can cause serious health effects. If you work outdoors in areas where public access cannot be controlled, or inside in places frequented by the public, you should know how to protect yourself from injury.

Needlestick injuries pose a risk if the needle is contaminated with the hepatitis B, hepatitis C, or HIV virus, or one of more than 30 diseases transmitted through blood and bodily fluids. (HIV causes AIDS and gradually destroys the body’s immune system. The hepatitis B and C viruses can cause a variety of health problems, including permanent liver damage and liver cancer.) A single exposure incident can cause infection.

The number of workers who get needlestick injuries every year is unknown, but time-loss claims for the five-year period between 2000 and 2004 totalled

385, with 7,445 days lost due to needlestick injuries. The majority of these injuries occur in the health care sector.

Still, used syringes are often thrown away in parks, streets, alleys, empty lots, public washrooms, and on beaches. And workers continue to find carelessly discarded needles, sometimes concealed in unexpected places — like the back seat of a police car or the heating vent of a building under construction.

### **Employers’ responsibilities**

Employers who identify needlestick injuries as a workplace hazard must comply with Part 6 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation. If you are an employer, you must:

- Develop and implement exposure-control plans that eliminate or minimize specific risks and hazards in your workplace
- Provide employee training that details risks, safe work procedures, and proper disposal techniques
- Conduct accident investigations and

develop an exposure-control plan when warranted

- Inform and educate workers about eliminating or reducing the risk of contact with blood and certain body fluids
- Provide workers with the equipment, tools, and personal protective equipment (PPE) they need, as well as training that outlines proper use

Beyond health care workplaces, some of the other workplace settings that may require exposure control plans include law enforcement; fire, rescue, and lifesaving services; correctional institutions; research labs; funeral homes and crematoriums; schools; waste removal; and construction sites.

### **Expect the unexpected**

WorkSafeBC (WCB) regional prevention manager Tom Lauritzen says the key to preventing needlestick injuries outside of the health care profession lies in expecting the unexpected.

“Part of the challenge is that needles

are showing up in the most unlikely places,” he says. “You need to be aware that these things could sit in places that aren’t invisible but aren’t readily noticeable either.”

Lauritzen recalls the story of a maintenance worker who discovered a stash of used needles while completing routine maintenance at a motel. The needles were hidden behind a mirror that he was removing for repair. “In that instance the worker wasn’t using safe work procedures because there wasn’t an expectation that there would be broken-off needles behind the mirror.” The incident led to the development of safety procedures.

Risk assessments and the resulting safe work procedures will vary greatly from business to business and from one location to the next.

In Delta, strict procedures protect all municipal workers, especially crews who work outside. The last needlestick injury incident in Delta occurred in 1993 when a worker guiding a hose into a pumper truck was struck by a needle that became attached to the hose.

Cathy Cook, senior human resources officer with the Corporation of Delta, says municipal workers must be vigilant when working in public places; they wear gloves and use tongs to pick up garbage. They are also taught never to reach into bushes or similar areas to retrieve anything.

“Instead they use a litter picker to reach in and drag stuff out so they can see what it is before they use their hands,” says Cook, who is also president of the B.C. Municipal Safety Association.

### **Daily sweeps to remove needles**

Schoolyards are another area of concern. In Vancouver, employees take the issue very seriously, particularly at schools where they encounter needles on a regular basis.

Bill Ostrom, manager of operations for the Vancouver School Board, says grounds maintenance workers do



### **Hiring the experts**

A walk down the alleys of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside might well turn up a carelessly discarded needle. Throw in a movie crew and the probability of a chance encounter escalates considerably.

Location manager Kendrie Upton has worked locally on many large-scale film productions. Her philosophy for dealing with needlesticks is simple – bring in the experts. “My personal preference in all cases is to hire someone who I know is well trained to take responsibility for cleanup and disposal of whatever they might find,” she says. “I don’t get production assistants or any of our personnel to clean up where I know there are going to be sharps.”

Upton hires cleaning crews to powerwash filming locations and scour the area for needles before film crews move in. In particularly dangerous or busy areas, like downtown Vancouver, she may post guards at either end of a set to help keep out potentially deadly contaminants.

“If I don’t post security, there will be needles back within 20 minutes,” she says.

routine sweeps of school grounds to locate and remove needles. Some areas require daily sweeps. Ostrom stresses that children and staff who must use needles to inject medicine at school are not the problem.

Key staff receive training in how to deal with needles. Similar to the Delta workers, they are instructed to wear puncture-resistant gloves, use tongs, and discard needles in sharps containers, which are located in every school in the district. Children are taught to report needles whenever they find them on school grounds, and to leave disposal to staff.

### **Workers’ responsibilities**

Whatever the situation, workers have responsibilities to help reduce the risk of contact with contaminated blood (and certain body fluids). You must:

- Attend education and training sessions provided by your employer
- Use controls and follow safe work practices established by your employer for your protection
- Use available tools and PPE provided for use in chance encounters with blood and certain body fluids

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### **Extensive training in Delta**

Cathy Cook, senior human resources officer for the Corporation of Delta, remembers the day 10 years ago when she returned to work after a vacation to find hundreds of hypodermic needles soaking in ice cream pails filled with bleach.

The needles, still wrapped in plastic, had been dumped in an empty lot in Delta. Delta municipal staff found the needles, followed the municipality's procedures, and left the mess for Cook to figure out upon her return.

"The policy at the time was to soak needles in a bleach solution until they were disposed of," says Cook. "It was quite something."

Procedures have changed considerably since that time. The ice cream buckets are gone, replaced by sharps containers located in municipal offices and in all maintenance vehicles.

Cook says training is key. Staff understand the risks and know how to retrieve and dispose of needles in a way that does not put them or their co-workers at risk.

Municipal workers at increased risk include mechanics, boulevard maintenance staff, parks crews, and staff within the fire and police departments. And police officers are not the only ones in the police department at risk. Staff who clean or repair police cruisers must also be vigilant.

"Suspects will sometimes stash a needle in the car's backseat during the trip to the police station," says Cook. "The cleaners are taught to always push the back seat of the police car seats down with a tool to ensure they can see into the seat's seams before they begin cleaning."

- Know how to get immediate first aid and medical attention (within two hours) and how to report incidents of exposure to blood and other body fluids

All workplaces should have basic work procedures to deal with the rare incidents that could occur. Above all, remember the following fundamental tips if you do find a used needle:

- Don't pick up sharps and other items unless you have the proper tools and PPE, and you have been instructed how to do so safely
- Don't pick up anything with the intention of discarding it later
- Don't place needles in regular garbage under any circumstances – you may create a hazard for others
- Don't reach for objects you cannot see

### **For more information**

For more information on preventing workplace exposures to needlestick injuries, contact the WorkSafe Call Centre at 604 276-3100 or toll-free in B.C. at 1 888 621-SAFE (7233). The WCB publication, *HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis B and C: Preventing Exposure at Work*, is also available for download from the Publications section of our web site at [www.worksafebc.com](http://www.worksafebc.com).



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