

Discarding Sharps

Easy ways to trash your needles, lancets, and other sharps safely | By Kimberly Goad

Raise your hand if you dispose of your used needles, syringes, lancets, and other sharps properly pretty much every time. Which is to say, when you're at home, you place them in a thick plastic container that you take to a designated drop box or supervised collection site when nearly full. Outside the home, you make sure you have something to store them in for safekeeping.

All of the above makes you a rare bird: Most of the 9 million people in the United States who give themselves injections throw their used needles in the trash or flush them down the toilet, both of which are dangerous, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Anyone who comes into contact with used sharps is at risk for an accidental needlestick and is in danger of being exposed to a blood-borne infection such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV.

"A lot of people simply don't know that they should put the sharps in a specific container and find a place to dispose of them," says Joanne Rinker, MS, RD, CDE, LDN, FADE, of Population Health Improvement Partners in Rainesville, North Carolina. "It's fairly easy—it's just a matter of doing it."



“WHEN YOU’RE AWAY FROM HOME, USE OLD TEST STRIP BOTTLES OR EMPTY PRESCRIPTION BOTTLES TO HOLD PEN NEEDLES, LANCETS, AND USED SHARPS [SEPARATELY] UNTIL YOU GET HOME.”

—Kellie Antinori-Lent, MSN, RN, ACNS-BC, BC-ADM, CDE

TRASHING YOUR SHARPS

An old laundry detergent or fabric softener bottle can be used as a dedicated sharps container. When it’s about three-quarters full (any higher raises the risk of a needlestick injury), dispose of it; how and where depends on where you live. “Check with your local municipality to see about specific rules and regulations,” suggests Kellie Antinori-Lent, MSN, RN, ACNS-BC, BC-ADM, CDE, of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center–Shadyside Hospital. “Sharps disposal isn’t regulated by the federal government—it’s not even regulated by the state. So the Food and Drug Administration will give you guidelines, but it’s up to each local municipality to decide exactly what should be done.”

Some places allow you to throw your sharps container in with your regular trash (as long as it isn’t one of the red ones marked “Biohazard”). But even if you take the recommended step of placing the container in the center of the bag and surrounding it with other trash, the risk of needlesticks is still there. “Safety needs to be first,” says Rinker. On that note, try one of the following:

» SIGN UP FOR A MAIL-BACK PROGRAM

The company will send you a sharps container. When it’s almost full, order another and mail the first one back in a prepaid box. Try PureWay Sharps Disposal System (pureway.com), GRP Sharps Disposal (sharpsdisposal.com), or Sharps Compliance (sharpsinc.com).

» SAVE MONEY WITH DIY DISPOSAL

Use a lidded and leak-proof plastic container—whether it’s an actual sharps container like the ones made by BD (available at Target, Walmart, and on amazon.com) or an empty laundry detergent jug, plastic coffee container, or fabric softener bottle. Before dropping it off at a collection site, secure the lid with duct tape and label it “Sharps Container” and “Do Not Recycle,” says Rinker. Go to safeneedledisposal.org to find a disposal site near you, or ask your local police station if it accepts sharps containers for disposal.



DRUG DISPOSAL

Unused insulin or other medications tossed into the trash may end up in the wrong hands. Flushing pills down the toilet isn’t an option, either. They could find their way into streams and rivers (and, possibly, your drinking water). Try one of these solutions instead:

- 1 Bring your unused meds—both current and expired—to a drug take-back program, such as the twice-yearly event sponsored by the Drug Enforcement Administration. Drop off the meds at a designated site to be disposed of properly. Some cities have year-round drop-off sites. To find what’s available in your community, go to dea.gov.
- 2 Try this tip from the Environmental Protection Agency: Remove pills from the bottle and mix with coffee grounds, dirt, kitty litter—anything that makes them unappealing to eat. Place the mixture in a disposable container with a lid and throw it out with the regular trash.
- 3 Donate unexpired medication to a charity, such as Insulin for Life (insulinforlifeusa.org). Or ask your pharmacist about programs in your area.

TIPS FOR
A BETTER
2017

When driving somewhere, park farther away from the entrance so you have to walk.
—Jen Borrasso, type 1