

What Do I Tell My Patients?

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently revised its recommendations on safe disposal of used needles. EPA now discourages patients from placing containers of used needles (syringes) in the household trash. This previous practice creates needle stick hazards for workers in the waste and other industries. The new EPA information (<http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/other/medical/sharps.htm>) specifically states that patients should “ask your local health care professional or pharmacist if they offer disposal, or if they know of safe programs in the area.” Healthcare professionals are well positioned to educate patients on safe needle disposal. Some health care facilities, especially those with services dedicated to patients with diabetes, also offer disposal to their patients.

Following is information that should help you advise your injecting patients:

KNOW YOUR PATIENTS AND ADVISE THEM APPROPRIATELY

There are different disposal options that may be more suited to your patient, depending on the therapy they are receiving.

Patients whose therapy require only short-term injections – For patients injecting for a short period of time (e.g., infertility, allergy and interferon treatments), a onetime sharps mail back program is often the best solution.

Patients whose therapy requires long-term injection – For patients injecting daily over an indefinite period of time (e.g., for diseases such as diabetes, arthritis or HIV), cost may become a factor in proper disposal. While needle destruction devices may be high in the initial cost, over time they could prove to be the most cost effective. Alternatively, a needle clipper is usually inexpensive and can collect hundreds of needles; however, the patient will also need to purchase a sharps container (of the mail back variety – if possible) to properly dispose of the needles when it is full.

Patients under injection therapy for highly infectious diseases – For patients injecting for a highly infectious disease (e.g., HIV, Hepatitis B, or Hepatitis C), their used needles/syringes could pose a potential public health risk if improperly disposed. Please insist that these patients use one of the many safe disposal options. Any of the programs will work, but the patient should be advised and made to understand how imperative it is to the safety of their community that they use or purchase a program that provides safe disposal for their used needles. A sharps mail back program would provide convenience and anonymity as well as safe disposal.

Understanding Your Patient’s Other Needs

Your advice should also consider other barriers that your patient may be facing when considering safe disposal options. For example, is disposal cost a concern? Is anonymity a concern? Is convenience a concern? Mail backs and destruction devices provide both anonymity and convenience, while community drop-off programs and household hazardous waste programs are inexpensive (often free) but don’t always offer the convenience or anonymity some patients desire.

Safe Disposal Resources to help you

The Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal is a collaboration of businesses, community groups, non-profit organizations and local, state and federal government entities that promotes public awareness and solutions for the safe disposal of needles, syringes and other sharps in the community. For more information on safe needle disposal contact the Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal at 800-643-1643 or www.safeneedledisposal.org. The Coalition has information and material that can help you guide your patients on safe needle disposal.

SafeNeedleDisposal.Org

Coalition for Safe
Community Needle Disposal

1 800 643 1643

HOW DO I BEST HELP MY PATIENTS?

- **Work Together.** Changing behavior isn't easy. It will take the efforts of everyone involved to ultimately change the way people dispose of their used needles at home. Work with other health care professionals (other physicians, nurses, educators, pharmacists, hospital administrators) and public health officials and waste officials to determine what disposal solutions may work best for your community.

Promote Local Needle Disposal Programs. If you are aware of programs in your community for safe needle disposal, be sure to share that information about those programs with your patients. If pamphlets are available, consider placing them in your office waiting area.

- **Research Disposal Program Availability.** If you are not aware of programs in your community, contact your local solid waste department (city or county government pages in your phonebook) to determine if there are drop-off programs, such as household hazardous waste programs, that accept used needles at these facilities. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a special website that identifies at-home needle disposal regulations for each state. This is a good place to get started if you are trying to determine what is available in your community (<http://www.cdc.gov/needledisposal/>).
- **Be a Community Leader.** Work with other health care professionals (other physicians, nurses, educators, community leaders, public health officials) and develop a community based program for your community. Contact the Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal at 800-643-1643 for help or ideas on getting a program started in your community.
- **Know Your Patients.** Understand that many patients who use syringes to treat medical conditions already face significant economic challenges due to these conditions. Work with appropriate groups and individuals in the community and/or state to remove economic barriers to safe disposal programs.
- **Recommend Products.** If there are no programs available, encourage patients to purchase one of the disposal options currently available on the market. In addition, the Coalition (<http://www.safeneedledisposal.org/>) features disposal solutions on its website. This lists some current products available on the market and will link patients directly to the vendor of the product.
 - a. Mail back programs are abundant. Listed are some products currently on the market -
Becton, Dickinson and Company – 877-927-8363 or
Sharps Compliance, Inc. – 800-772-5657
 - b. At-home needle destruction devices. Many of the products on the market sever, burn or melt the needle and the patient can throw the syringe or plunger in the garbage. Some of those products include the following:
BD – Needle Clipper (clips the needle into a small container)

Agencies and businesses working on this issue include: American Association of Diabetes Educators, American Diabetes Association, American Medical Association, American Pharmacists Association, National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, National Association of Chain Drug Stores, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Association for Home Care and Hospice, National Recycling Coalition, National Solid Wastes Management Association, U.S. Conference of Mayors, Waste Management, Sharps Compliance, and Becton, Dickinson and Co.