

Needle Distribution

In BC, a needle* distribution policy was introduced in 2002, supported by the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), Ministry of Health, and the Best Practice Recommendations for Canadian Harm Reduction Programs. While there is strong support for needle distribution, people may have questions about the effectiveness of needle distribution and safe needle disposal. This information sheet aims to address these questions.

Why access to sterile needles is important

Injection with a used needle increases the chances of transmitting viruses such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV), and other infections¹. Using a sterile needle and syringe for each injection is an effective way to reduce the risk of transmitting these viruses. Evidence shows that improving access to sterile needles contributes to a significant reduction in needle sharing² and HIV rates^{3,4}, helping individuals, their families and communities to be safer and healthier⁵.

Needle distribution programs provide sterile needles and other harm reduction supplies for people who use drugs. The BCCDC recommends that people receive enough needles to be able to use a new one for each injection and encourages organizations to provide supplies for peer-to-peer distribution to reach people who may not be able to use harm reduction supply distribution sites.

Promoting needle distribution instead of needle exchange

In the past, some needle exchange programs required people to trade (or exchange) their used needles for sterile needles. However, evidence shows that limiting the number of needles distributed increases the likelihood of people sharing or re-using needles^{6,7}. When people share used needles, the likelihood of transmitting HIV, HBV, HCV and other infections increases⁸. A review of international needle distribution programs found the overall needle return rate was 90%⁹. Thus, strict exchange policies, such as "one-for-one", are not necessary to achieve high needle return rates, and they can reduce the effectiveness of needle distribution programs².

Why safe needle disposal is important

People do not intend to harm others by discarding used needles, but rather they need an easy way to dispose of needles safely. The safe disposal of used needles prevents re-using and sharing of needles, as well as limits the number of discarded needles in the community. While the likelihood of transmitting infection from a needle stick injury in the community is very low¹⁰, the risk can be further reduced through greater access to safe needle disposal options¹¹.

Harm reduction programs, which distribute sterile needles, play a key role in needle recovery and disposal through community and staff education, as well as:

- Distributing small sharps disposal containers for personal use.
- Accepting used needles back for disposal.
- Providing safe needle disposal education to people who use drugs and other community members.
- Conducting regular sweeps for used needles in the areas that they operate.

A list of harm reduction supply distribution and collection sites in your area can be found on [Toward the Heart](#)

*The term 'needle' refers to either a loose needle or a needle with an attached syringe.

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