

## Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

## Cleaning industry - Handling sharp objects

### Why is handling sharp objects a problem?

Sharps are objects that can penetrate the skin, such as broken glass and discarded needles. These injuries can allow infections to enter the body. Infectious diseases such as Hepatitis B, or C; HIV or tetanus can enter the body this way.

Some work areas will have higher risks, for example, public toilets and health care settings, but all cleaners are potentially at risk. Skin penetrating injuries from sharps can be sustained when doing a number of regular cleaning tasks, for example:

- picking up and carrying rubbish
- cleaning toilets and other amenities
- disposing of waste, including general and clinical waste.

### Some possible solutions to sharps problems

**There are a number of ways cleaners can reduce the risk of skin penetrating injuries from sharps, including:**

- avoid handling sharps whenever possible. Check to see if this is part of your contract. However, if you find a sharp and it is not in your contract to handle sharps, it is important that you notify a responsible person as soon as possible to ensure it is disposed of safely
- use a portable sharps disposal kit (gloves, tongs and container) for the disposal of discarded needles. The container should be rigid-walled and puncture resistant, e.g. a commercial sharps container

- dispose of sharps safely:
  - bring the container to the needle and do not carry the needle over to the container
  - use suitable tools (e.g. tongs) to handle sharps. Do not improvise by using sticks or other inappropriate items as these may cause the needle to flick and cause injury
  - if an appropriate implement to handle sharps is not available, dispose of the needle by picking it up by the middle of the barrel of the syringe
  - keep the sharp end of the needle facing away from you and place the needle in the container sharp end first
  - securely close the container
  - wear disposable gloves to handle the needle/syringe, if available, and wash your hands with running water and soap afterwards
  - dispose of the sharps container safely
- wrap all broken items for disposal to prevent cuts during handling
- do not lift rubbish bags by the base or compress them manually
- do not carry plastic garbage bags close to the body. Use trolleys instead
- do not put your hands in places you can't see (e.g. behind toilets, basins or into rubbish bins)
- do not work where there is insufficient light to see discarded sharps

**Other actions cleaners should consider are:**

- record where sharps are being found, to help identify any high risk areas

- train all workers in safe ways to handle sharps
- if you have regular contact with sharps, you should be immunised against Hepatitis B and ensure that your tetanus immunisation is current. If you are at significant risk of needlestick injuries, you should have a blood test after completing the course of your Hepatitis B vaccination to make sure you have adequate protection
- determine what actions are to be taken if someone sustains a skin-penetrating injury and how medical attention is to be accessed.
- *(Further information on appropriate action to take is available from Queensland Health's Clean Needle Helpline 1800 633 353.)*
- install features that deter sharps concealment (e.g. perspex toilet roll holders, good lighting)
- provide sharps disposal containers in high risk locations (e.g. public toilets, accommodation facilities)
- maintain good housekeeping practices to deter concealment (e.g. surplus stock stored in public places can be used to conceal sharps)
- undertake regular surveillance activities to ensure prompt detection and disposal of sharps.

Cleaners working in areas where sharps are regularly found should negotiate with their clients about implementing appropriate deterrent measures.

For more information on skin penetrating injuries and other workplace health and safety issues call 1300 369 915 or visit [www.worksafe.qld.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au)

**In addition to these actions, there are also measures that building or business owners can take to minimise the risk of sharps been discarded or concealed, for example:**

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