

Community Needle Stick Injuries

Injuries or 'pokes' from discarded needles found in community settings, such as parks, streets or beaches, can cause concern about the transmission of blood-borne viruses. The following information outlines the risks of community needle stick injuries and what to do if a needle stick injury occurs.

Measures that prevent needle stick injuries in the community

The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) recommends implementing strategies¹ to support [safe needle disposal](#) and to reduce the number of improperly discarded needles in public places. These strategies include distribution of personal sharps disposal containers; accepting syringe returns at harm reduction sites and other health service locations; and providing safe needle disposal education to people who use substances and other community members. Such strategies have been applied by health authorities, municipalities, hospitals, pharmacies, harm reduction service providers, and community members, decreasing the number of improperly disposed needles in the community and reducing risks of a needle stick injury.²

Risks of needle stick injury

When a needle stick injury occurs, people may have concerns about possible exposure to blood-borne viruses, specifically, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus (HBV), and hepatitis C virus (HCV); however, the risk of viral transmission from a community needle stick injury is extremely low.^{3,4,5}

The risk of HIV, HBV, and HCV transmission from a needle stick injury in a community setting is far less than in a healthcare setting due to the following factors:³

- The injury does not happen immediately after needle use.
- The needle rarely contains fresh blood.
- Any virus present has been exposed to drying and environmental temperatures.
- Injuries are typically superficial.

What to do if someone is accidentally poked with a needle

Getting poked by a needle can be a scary event. However, it is important to remember that the risk of infection from a community needle stick injury is extremely low. Provincial guidelines guide physicians in the management of blood and body fluid exposures.^{6,7} In the event of a needle stick injury, follow these steps:

1. Allow the wound to bleed freely

- Do not squeeze the wound. This may damage tissues and increase risk of infection.

2. Wash the wound with soap and water

- Do not apply bleach or alcohol to the wound.

3. Immediately go to your local emergency department for follow-up care.

- Hospital staff will do an assessment to determine the need for post-exposure prophylaxis (e.g., medications and/or vaccinations to further reduce the risk of transmission).
- Baseline blood tests for HBV, HCV and HIV will be done at this visit with follow-up blood tests over the next three months to make sure none of these viruses have been transmitted.

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

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References

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