

## Preventing needlesticks

Needlestick injuries remain one of the most serious hazards health care workers face. A needlestick or a cut from a contaminated sharp could cause the person to be infected with a bloodborne pathogen, including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus and hepatitis C virus.

About 40 percent of needlestick injuries occur during usage, 40 percent occur after usage but before disposal, 15 percent are related to disposal and 5 percent occur during device recapping despite it being prohibited. By using safety devices, worker education and training, and work practice controls, needlestick injuries can be reduced by more than 90 percent.

Implementing a few prevention strategies can help reduce needlesticks for dentists and their employees.

- The first step to prevention is creating a written exposure control plan, which is required by law and must be updated annually. It should include implementation and consideration of safety devices.
- Employers also must implement universal precautions, provide employees with protective equipment such as gloves, and use safety devices. Employers also must implement work practice controls such as no needle recapping and disposing of sharps immediately after use.
- Employers are required to provide hepatitis B vaccinations to their employees at no cost.
- Dental offices should try to limit interruptions during any procedures involving sharps.
- The dental team should explain all procedures to their patients before beginning the procedure to help ensure patients will cooperate.
- If patients such as children are uncooperative, it is important to ask for assistance to keep them from moving around.

Using safety devices is another way to help protect dentists and their employees from needlesticks. The dental team should always use safety devices, and everyone should be trained on how to properly use them. Characteristics that will help make these devices most effective are:

- Allowing the users' hands to remain behind the needle
- The ability to easily be used by a left- or right-handed person
- The safety device can be permanently engaged after use
- It is easy to determine whether the safety feature has been activated

Proper disposal of sharps will also help prevent injuries. A few precautions will help avoid a needlestick during disposal.

- The sharps disposal container should be clearly marked and placed as close as possible to the procedure area.
- Disposal containers should be at a height where all employees can see them and easily access the top of the container.
- Do not overfill sharps containers.
- Containers should be locked so children and other patients cannot get into them.
- Containers should be puncture resistant and the sides and bottom must be leakproof.

Following these precautions will help create a safe work environment for the entire dental team. And remember: never recap needles, be sure to dispose of needles correctly and always report all needlestick or other injuries.

Other resources:

<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/bloodbornepathogens/index.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2000-108/>