Q. How do I find out if a sharps disposal program is in place in my community?

A. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health maintains a list of communities with sharps disposal programs on our website. Please check this site periodically; we try to add new communities to the list once we know that a program has started. Additionally, you may contact your local board of health for information.

Q. What are the requirements to use my community's sharps disposal program?

A. Local program guidelines may vary; therefore you should contact your local board of health for specific restrictions in your community. Generally, sharps must be placed into a rigid, puncture resistant, sealed, leak-proof container before they can be taken to a disposal site. Loose needles, or needles placed in glass containers or bags will not be accepted at disposal sites. Please do not leave sharps containers on the ground or outside of the collection kiosk or box. If the collection box is full or if you do not have access to the area, please come back another time.

Q. Can I take my sharps back to the pharmacy or location where I bought them?

A. There are no current requirements for a pharmacy or a medical care provider to take the sharps back from you. However, you may contact them to see if they have services that may be available to you.

Q. What do I do with needles that I use for medications that I give to my animals?

A. Used or leftover needles, syringes or other sharps should be disposed of in the same way, regardless of whether they are used for people or for animals.

Q. Who can I contact for more information?

A. Please contact your local board of health for local program guidelines, residency requirements, specific restrictions and available dates and times. etc.

Frequently Asked Questions about the

Proper Disposal of Lancets, Needles and Syringes (Sharps)

October 2008
MDPH – Bureau of Environmental Health

In July of 2006, the Pharmacy Needle Access Law was passed with the intent of reducing injuries and the spread of disease. The law includes a mandate to design a statewide program to dispose of needles and other 'sharps' safely and responsibly. On March 12, 2008, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Public Health Council (MDPH/PHC) approved amendments to the state's medical waste regulations, which include a ban on the disposal of sharps in household trash, effective on July 1, 2010.

Q. Why do we need to be concerned about sharps being placed in household trash?

A. In Massachusetts, an estimated 2 million used needles are generated each week due to chronic disease and other medical conditions. Improper disposal of needles and other sharps can pose a health and injury risk to other adults, children and pets at home and housekeeping or janitorial staff in public settings. Also, containers placed in the trash may rupture in compactors, landfills or other machinery, putting sanitation workers at risk. People who are exposed to sharps face the possibilities of a painful injury and the risk of contracting diseases. All needle stick injuries must be treated as if the needle were infected with a disease, leading to the costs and anxieties of medical testing and treatment.

Q. Why did the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) impose a ban on the disposal of sharps in household trash?

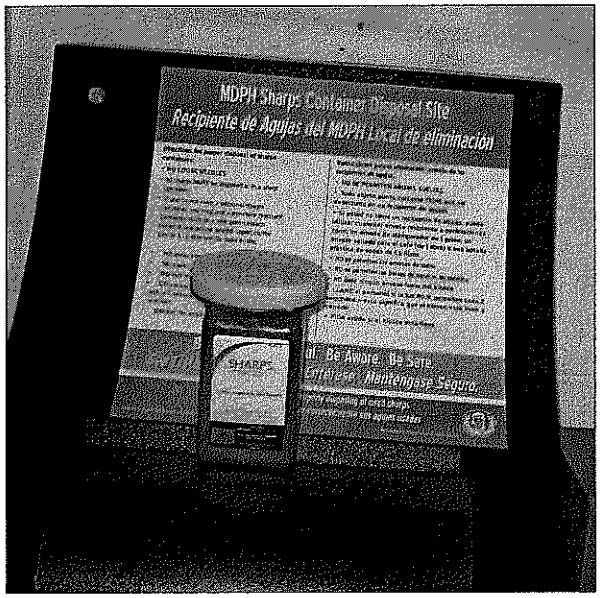
A. In 2005, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) recommended that people no longer throw home-generated sharps into household trash and encouraged safer alternative disposal methods. A decision was made in Massachusetts to follow the recommendations of EPA, impose the ban, and place the focus on developing safe and responsible sharps disposal options. The ban on sharps in household trash will be effective on July 1, 2010.

Q. Have other states or large cities imposed such a ban?

A. Yes. The states of California, Idaho, Wisconsin, Louisiana, and Oregon and many municipalities no longer allow sharps to be placed into the household trash. Other states have pending legislation to ban sharps in the trash.

Q. I use needles to give myself medication. Am I still able to put my sharps in the household trash until July 1, 2010?

A. Some Massachusetts communities have already banned sharps from municipal waste and/or have established sharps disposal programs. In general, however, until July 1, 2010, you may continue to place sharps in a capped, puncture resistant plastic container, such as a sharps container or detergent bottle, and place it in the trash. The container **should NOT** be placed with items to be recycled.



Q. What will I do once sharps are banned from being put in household trash?

A. Local communities and others are working to establish sharps collection and disposal programs statewide. There are also other options, such as needle return programs that may be available at a doctor's office, mail-back programs from needle suppliers, etc.