

by Kathryn Evans

Talking trash: Ensuring proper waste disposal

- » Proper waste disposal ensures staff, environmental, and business safety.
- » Identify the types of waste you produce.
- » Develop a waste disposal plan for each type.
- » Make disposal easy, convenient, and safe.
- » Provide adequate staff training annually and at orientation.

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By their very nature, healthcare organizations generate a lot of waste. Beyond regular trash, there are regulated medical waste (e.g., needles, bloody bandages), hazardous pharmaceutical waste (e.g., unused medications, empty asthma inhalers), and secure documents (e.g., those that include sensitive patient health information that must remain private). Healthcare organizations of all sizes and types have to appropriately handle the diverse waste streams present in their facilities and follow the relevant disposal requirements.



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Unfortunately, staff often get confused, throwing out empty medicine bottles in regulated waste bags or placing a needle in a pharmaceutical waste container. This introduces a host of risks.

The dangers of improper disposal

When organizations do not consistently follow waste disposal standards, there can be personal safety, environmental safety, and business security ramifications.

Personal safety

Poor disposal can expose staff to dangerous chemicals, pathogens, and other items that could cause harm. For example, if staff don't use the correct personal protective equipment when throwing away needles and items saturated with blood or body fluids, they are at risk for exposure to dangerous pathogens. Similarly, if needles are not thrown away in sharps containers, they can poke through trash receptacles and cause needle sticks. Due to these risks, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)¹ requires facilities to segregate their regulated medical waste from regular trash.

Environmental safety

A large body of evidence points to increasing levels of dangerous minerals and chemicals—such as mercury—in our clean water supply.² Some of this contamination is caused by inappropriate hazardous pharmaceutical disposal. For instance, when organizations put pharmaceuticals into sharps containers for regulated medical waste, they make it impossible to treat the drug waste in a manner that eliminates its potential to harm the environment. Even more serious is when

staff toss hazardous chemicals into the regular trash. In this case, the negative environmental effects are nearly immediate, because the chemicals aren't treated before disposal.

Business security

Organizations must have a reliable process for dealing with sensitive information. Without a secure document destruction plan, as well as a method for disposing of hard drives, a healthcare organization can increase the likelihood of HIPAA compliance lapses or data security breaches.

Getting a handle on what you have

A key first step in improving waste compliance is to fully appreciate the types of waste your organization produces. As mentioned earlier, most facilities will have regulated medical waste. This includes any items that are saturated with blood or body fluids (as defined by OSHA and state regulations), needles or other sharps that have been used on a patient or contaminated with blood or body fluids, and pathological and microbiological wastes. Regulated medical waste is treated most commonly through autoclaving and/or incineration. Normally it is easy for a facility to identify this type of waste, and organizations should use red bags and sharps containers for placement of the material prior to disposal.

Organizations also tend to have some degree of hazardous waste. There are many types as defined in the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976,³ which outlines and describes in detail what constitutes a hazardous waste.

Pharmaceuticals can be considered hazardous if a chemical contained in the drug is dangerous or if the chemical combination exhibits hazardous characteristics. Due to the volume and variety of pharmaceuticals, it can be difficult for organizations to comprehensively quantify their hazardous waste.

Making it easy to do the right thing

After identifying what waste streams are present, an organization must create a disposal plan for each type of waste. The best plans incorporate clear-cut disposal pathways, meaning they make the process straightforward and convenient. For example, there are hundreds of thousands of different pharmaceuticals, and it isn't practical to think that a busy healthcare employee would know all the various types and only throw out the hazardous ones in the hazardous waste bin.

Instead, an organization can have an overall plan for pharmaceutical waste that over-classifies and treats all drugs in a manner that is completely compliant. This helps employees perform their jobs quickly and safely.

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As for regulated medical waste, having sharps containers in the right place, at the right height, and in the right style is essential to reduce the risk of exposure. If a sharps container is too far away or too high, causing the healthcare professional to dispose of a needle by reaching, there is a danger. In addition, if the sharps container is too hard to see through (sometimes the lid configuration makes it difficult to tell if the container is full) healthcare professionals could incur a needle stick.

For document destruction, it is essential to have secure bins available at key areas within the office. Make sure they are not difficult to get to and are clearly marked so staff can dispose of sensitive information quickly and efficiently.

Avoiding staff confusion

Training is central to this mission. You can have the best disposal plans in the world, but if you don't take the time to train staff on how to follow them, you still open yourself up to risk. Most organizations provide waste management training at least annually and when new employees join the organization. Online trainings can be beneficial, because they are convenient and staff members can fit them in easily in between other activities. A key part of this training should be requesting input from the staff. They might have great suggestions on container placement or other ways to effect proper disposal. Organizations should also provide reminders to staff throughout the year, such as posters placed in key areas.

As easy as one, two, three

Although the types of waste streams and the concerns around them can be complex, ultimately, consistent compliance comes down to three essential things: (1) identifying your waste streams, (2) having a plan and system for disposal, and (3) training your staff. Organizations that embrace these strategies will not only improve compliance, but preserve the safety of their staff and environment as well. 🗑️

1. U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) website: <https://www.osha.gov/>
2. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Drinking Water Contaminants – Standards and Regulations. Available at <http://bit.ly/2axkY6S>
3. EPA: Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) Laws and Regulations. Available at <https://www.epa.gov/rcra>

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