

Managing and Reducing Medical Waste

Healthcare organizations generate a large volume of waste every year. They are legally and ethically bound to handle, treat, and dispose of regulated medical/biohazardous waste because it contains potential infectious materials. Beyond these obligations, growing concerns about financial costs and the environment have prompted many organizations to consider strategies and programs to broadly reduce waste.

According to the Healthcare Environmental Resource Center, waste segregation may be the most effective way to reduce medical waste as it reduces the volume of total waste.¹

The goal is to keep general waste out of the medical/hazardous waste stream.

Other strategies and best practices also can help organizations improve their waste management and reduction initiatives, such as assessing current processes, developing thorough plans, clearly specifying staff members' roles and responsibilities, and offering robust training. Although precise approaches will depend on the characteristics of each facility, the following high-level tips can help organizations focus their efforts to manage and reduce medical waste.²

1

Be aware of federal and state medical waste standards, and ensure that your healthcare organization has a waste management plan that specifically indicates what the [state regulatory agency](#) deems as regulated waste.

2

Ensure the waste management plan specifies the proper disposal of regulated medical waste and other types of waste generated. Inform staff members about the plan, and update it annually or as needed when changes occur.

3

Conduct an assessment of your organization's waste management efforts. Ensure that processes comply with applicable federal, state, and local regulations. Pinpoint any processes that are not working or need enhancement, and modify them as necessary.

4

Regularly monitor waste management efforts, and stay informed about advancements in medical waste management. Modify existing policies to reflect new best practices and compliance with regulations.

5

Educate staff members on the difference between regular trash, regulated medical waste/biohazardous waste, and recycling. Train staff members how to accurately identify, categorize, and safely dispose of different types of waste.

6

Provide sufficient and appropriate containers, bags, labels, and carts for separating and collecting waste. Clearly color code and label containers to indicate what kind of waste they should contain. Label regulated waste with the universal warning sign or the word "biohazard," and cover red bag waste containers.

7

Make sure general waste, infectious waste, sharps, pharmaceutical waste, and other hazardous materials are separated at the source to ensure proper and appropriate disposal into containers.

8

Place regular waste containers near medical waste containers so healthcare employees can intentionally separate and dispose of waste properly. Post signage with waste information (in several languages if necessary) near containers. Do not provide red bags in areas where medical waste is not generated. Do not place medical waste containers next to sinks.

9

To limit the use of medical containers as trash cans, install small medical waste containers and larger containers for general waste and recycling.

10

Carefully manage medication and supply inventories to prevent overstocking, which can result in waste. Ensure proper management of expired or unused medications, including disposal of hazardous and nonhazardous pharmaceutical waste.

11

Keep medications and chemotherapy agents separate from other regulated medical waste because they need specific handling (e.g., incineration) to meet state regulations.

12

Encourage healthcare employees to dispense only the amount of medication needed for a patient and to use prefilled syringes when possible rather than multidose vials.

13

Consider implementing drug recycling programs where feasible. Partner with organizations certified by the [National Association of Boards of Pharmacy](#) to gather and distribute unused medications responsibly.

14

For onsite treatment and disposal of medical waste, identify and use appropriate treatment technologies (as state regulations permit), such as steam sterilization (autoclaving), microwave sterilization, chemical disinfection and sterilization, and sewer discharge of approved liquids.

15

Institute a program to reuse products — such as sharps containers, basins, certain medical instruments, and washable gowns and linens — to decrease the amount of disposable or single-use medical products.

16

Recycle all nonhazardous waste — such as plastics, paper, and cardboard — according to state and local guidelines. Set up composting programs if feasible.

17

Consider reusing or refurbishing medical equipment, such as imaging devices, surgical instruments, and hospital beds. Work with a third-party or hospital reprocessor that will comply with the original equipment manufacturer's requirements before reusing any equipment.

18

Determine the potential benefits of implementing digital waste management systems or waste audit programs in your healthcare organization.

Resources

- [American Dental Association: Medical Waste Disposal](#)
- [Association of Medical Device Reprocessors: Top Resources](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Environmental Infection Control Guidelines: Regulated Medical Waste](#)
- [Healthcare Environmental Resource Center: A 10-Step Blueprint for Managing Pharmaceutical Waste in US Healthcare Facilities](#)
- [Healthcare Environmental Resource Center: State-by-State Regulated Medical Waste Resource Locator](#)
- [Healthcare Waste Institute: Resources](#)

- [Occupational Safety and Health Administration: Bloodborne Pathogens and Needlestick Prevention](#)
- [Occupational Safety and Health Administration: Hospitals eTool, Facilities Management/Waste Management](#)
- [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Final Rule: Management Standards for Hazardous Waste Pharmaceuticals and Amendment to the P075 Listing for Nicotine](#)
- [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Model Guidelines for State Medical Waste Management](#)
- [World Health Organization: Practicing Health Through Health Care Waste Management](#)

Endnotes

¹ Healthcare Environmental Resource Center. (2015). *Reducing regulated medical waste*. Retrieved from www.hercenter.org/rmw/reducingrmw.php

² The risk tips in this publication are based on the following resources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (n. d.). *Medical waste*. Retrieved from www.epa.gov/rcra/medical-waste; Healthcare Environmental Resource Center, *Reducing regulated medical waste*; Healthcare Environmental Resource Center. (2015). *Managing regulated medical waste*. Retrieved from www.hercenter.org/rmw/rmwmanaging.php; Healthcare Environmental Resource Center. (2015). *Waste reduction-hazardous waste*. Retrieved from www.hercenter.org/wastereduction/hazardouswaste.php; Henry, J. (2016, July 12). 9 ways to cut down on medical waste. *Healthcare Dive*. Retrieved from www.healthcaredive.com/news/9-ways-to-cut-down-on-medical-waste/422468/

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