Infectious Medical Waste Fact Sheet

WHAT IS INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE (IMW)?

Infectious medical waste is waste generated in the diagnosis, treatment or immunization of human beings or animals which has been or is likely to have been contaminated by an organism capable of causing disease in healthy humans. IMW includes items such as: cultures and stocks of microorganisms and biologicals; blood and blood products; pathological wastes; sharps; animal carcasses, body parts, bedding and related wastes; isolation wastes; any residue resulting from a spill cleanup; and any waste mixed with or contaminated by infectious medical waste.

WHAT IS NOT INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE?

Infectious medical waste does not include: human remains and body parts being used or examined for medical purposes; human remains lawfully interred in a cemetery or in preparation by a licensed mortician for interment or cremation; used personal hygiene products such as, diapers, facial tissues and sanitary napkins; gauze and dressing material, containing small amounts of blood or other body secretions; hair, nails and extracted teeth; and most waste generated by veterinary hospitals. Also, any radioactive wastes or waste classified as hazardous are **not** infectious medical waste.

HOW DO WE GET RID OF INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE?

Before IMW can be disposed of it must be treated to make it noninfectious. Several methods are available for this purpose. Traditional methods include: incineration; steam treatment or autoclaving; and liquid waste may be disposed of in approved sanitary sewers. In addition to these traditional methods there are many alternative methods being developed such as micro waving and use of various chemicals.

DO WE HAVE TO HAVE INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE?

Infectious medical waste is generated daily when people visit their family doctor for vaccines such as, flu shots and childhood immunizations. It is also generated when people have surgery and many other medical procedures. We cannot eliminate infectious medical waste, but we can minimize the amount generated by properly separating it from noninfectious medical waste and by reducing dependence on disposable items.

WHO GENERATES INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE?

There are many facilities which generate infectious medical waste. Some examples are: hospitals, doctors offices, dentists, clinics, laboratories, research facilities, veterinarians, ambulance squads and emergency medical service providers, etc. Infectious medical waste is even generated in homes by home health care providers and individuals, such as diabetics, who must receive injections at home.

HOW MUCH INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE IS GENERATED IN WEST VIRGINIA EACH YEAR?

The most recent data (1998) shows that the large quantity generators, those that generate more than fifty pounds in a one month per period, generated 6,163,294.44 pounds during the year. This figure did not include infectious medical waste generated by the estimated 7000 small quantity generators which account for approximately 2 million pounds per year.

HOW DO WEST VIRGINIANS TREAT AND DISPOSE OF INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE?

Some hospitals and laboratories are able to treat, on site, most or all of the IMW they generate. Several facilities in the state have medical waste incinerators or autoclaves within their facilities to treat the waste they generate. Most other generators of IMW must contract with an independent company to pick up their IMW and haul it away for treatment. When this occurs, the waste is hauled out of the state for treatment and disposal.

DOES INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE HAVE TO BE TRUCKED ALL OVER THE STATE?

Most facilities do not have the capability to treat the waste they generate at the facility. There are many reasons for this, but usually it is less expensive for a facility to contract with someone else than to install a treatment unit. Since there are only a few facilities in the state that can treat IMW, most of the waste generated in West Virginia must be trucked through the state to a treatment facility in another state.

HOW DO PEOPLE GET RID OF INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE AT HOME?

Most IMW generated at home consists of syringes and used needles. There are many different ways people can properly dispose of these used "sharps". There are services that provide containers to contain the used needles and when the container is nearly full, it is sealed closed and mailed back to the company for treatment and disposal. Also, people can create their own sharps container at home by using a hard plastic or metal container with a screw-on or tightly secured lid. The sharps are placed in the container, a bleach and water solution is added, the container is sealed, labeled and bagged then discarded with the rest of the garbage. An illustrated brochure detailing this procedure can be obtained by calling 1-800-922-1255.

WHO REGULATES INFECTIOUS MEDICAL WASTE HANDLING, TREATMENT AND DISPOSAL IN WEST VIRGINIA?

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources through the Bureau for Public Health's Office of Environmental Health Services has in place rules regulating the generation, handling, storage, transportation, treatment and disposal of infectious medical waste in the state of West Virginia. All generators of IMW are required to develop an infectious medical waste management plan. Any facility which generates more than fifty pounds per month must submit their plan to the WVDHHR Secretary for review and approval and also must apply for an annual permit. For more information about infectious medical waste, contact:

Infectious Medical Waste Program
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304-558-2981 or 1-800-922-1255