Precautions Advised to Prevent Needlestick Injuries Among US Healthcare Workers

Officials from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommended that hospitals and other healthcare employers adopt measures, including the use of needleless and safe-needle devices, to prevent injuries and illnesses from accidental needlesticks in the workplace.

“Today’s healthcare workforce faces a multitude of risks,” said NIOSH Director Linda Rosenstock, MD, MPH. “We know that needleless devices and safe-needle devices can save lives. We must do everything we can to protect the healthcare workers who have devoted their lives to keeping America healthy.” The agency noted that 600 000 to 800 000 needlestick injuries occur in the United States each year. In some instances, these accidents can lead to serious or potentially fatal infections with hepatitis B or C viruses or HIV, which is associated with AIDS. The numbers are estimates because many needlesticks go unreported, agency officials said.

In a bulletin entitled “NIOSH Alert: Preventing Needlestick Injuries in Health Care Settings,” the agency recommended:

- Eliminating the use of needles where possible.
- Using devices such as shields and sheaths.
- Prohibiting unsafe work practices, such as recapping, and training workers in safe procedures.
- Using safer devices, including needleless devices such as connectors of intravenous delivery systems that use blunt or valved ends rather than needles for attaching one length of intravenous tubing to another, devices that include sheaths and shields over needles as part of the design, devices that operate passively rather than requiring that personnel activate them, devices designed so that the user can tell that the safety feature is in place and active, and devices in which the safety feature cannot be deactivated.

In most cases, nurses report the largest number of needlesticks. However, laboratory staff, physicians, housekeepers, and other healthcare workers also report such injuries and are at risk. The agency noted that many devices are available to reduce the risk from needlesticks, but officials warn that no one device is appropriate for every healthcare setting and that training in safe practices is needed, no matter what kind of equipment is in place.

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