Where Does Medical Waste Go?
Click each step of the waste cycle to learn more.

The medical waste management cycle starts when medical waste is generated during the delivery of care and continues through segregation, collection, transport, treatment, and disposal. To ensure medical waste is managed compliantly, responsibly, and safely, it is important to understand the steps required from generation to disposal.

At Stericycle, we help healthcare organizations protect health and well-being by setting up compliant medical waste management programs that minimize environmental impact.

Visit www.stericycle.com for more information about how Stericycle can be your total medical waste management partner.
Generating Waste

The delivery of healthcare generates a variety of different types of waste.

- **Regulated Medical Waste**: Any item saturated with blood or other potentially infectious materials (OPIM), such as bandages, gauze, and personal protective equipment (PPE)
- **Sharps Waste**: Needles, scalpels, blades, and pipettes that have come in contact with blood, body fluids, or microorganisms
- **Trace Chemotherapeutic Waste**: Empty chemo drug vials, syringes and needles, spill kits, IV tubing and bags, contaminated gloves and gowns, materials from spill cleanups, or bodily fluids/waste
- **Pharmaceutical Waste**: Leftover, unused, or expired medication (including controlled substances) that is no longer needed or can no longer be used; can be classified as either hazardous or non-hazardous depending on its chemical properties and its risk to humans and the environment
- **Pathological Waste**: Human or animal body parts, organs, tissues, and surgical specimens (removed of formaldehyde, formalin, or other preservatives)

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Segregating Waste

Healthcare workers must segregate medical waste into the appropriate containers to ensure safe, compliant collection, transportation, treatment, and disposal under federal, state, and local regulations. There are different containers designed specifically for certain types of waste. For example, syringes should be collected in a sharps container, not in the regular trash.

Waste segregation has been simplified for illustration purposes. Segregation practices may vary depending on the type of waste, state regulations, and facility policy.

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Preparing Waste Containers for Transport

How an organization prepares waste for transport depends on the type of waste being disposed of. For instance, organizations that generate regulated medical waste (RMW) can either use corrugated boxes or specially designed reusable containers, whereas sharps should be disposed of in a closed, puncture-resistant container, and pharmaceutical waste should be placed in its own designated, color-coded receptacle. Trace chemotherapy waste and pathological waste, although forms of RMW, should be further segregated as well and marked for incineration. In preparation for transport, generators of medical waste should be aware of and follow the appropriate guidelines.

Container Preparation
Once the waste container is full, staff should prepare the waste for pickup by a medical waste management company. In some instances, outer packaging is required for transport.

Packaging and Labeling
For waste that is transported by a vehicle, follow Department of Transportation (DOT) regulations for packaging and labeling. Your waste hauler is also responsible for transporting the waste to a treatment facility in accordance with DOT requirements.

Recordkeeping
If the waste is being picked up by a waste hauler, the organization will provide tracking information and detailed records, such as a shipping paper or a manifest.

Shipping
If you are mailing the waste to a waste management facility, follow the requirements set by the carrier.

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After arriving at the permitted medical waste management facility, the medical waste will be treated according to applicable requirements to render it non-infectious. Stericycle uses two waste treatment methods:

**Autoclaving**
- Most common medical waste treatment method in the U.S.
- Uses high-pressure, high-temperature steam to render the waste non-infectious
- Autoclaved waste is then sent to landfill for final disposal

Waste treated by autoclaving include:

- RMW
- Sharps

**Incineration**
- Performed at a hospital, medical, and infectious waste incinerator
- Used when incineration is warranted or designated under state agency requirements
- Employs high temperatures that promote combustion or burning

Waste treated by incineration include:

- Pathological Waste
- Non-Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (Non-RCRA) Hazardous Waste Pharmaceuticals
- Trace Chemotherapeutic Waste

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Sending Treated Waste to its Final Destination

Depending on local regulations, after the medical waste has been rendered non-infectious, the waste management company sends the waste to a landfill or waste-to-energy facility.

**Waste-to-Energy Facility**
- The treated waste is converted to electricity using specially designed boilers that combust non-hazardous waste in a closed-loop system. The technology captures the heat generated by the combustion and uses it to create steam, which powers an electricity-producing turbine.
- The electricity is sent to local utility companies for use in homes and businesses—or it can be funneled back to the medical waste management plant to power its equipment.

**Landfill**
Treated waste is picked up from the treatment facility and brought to a landfill for final disposal.

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