Nov 9, 2026

As Home Healthcare Grows, Medical Waste Challenges Rise

As more healthcare moves into patients' homes, the need for clear, accessible medical waste disposal options is growing.



As more healthcare moves into patients' homes, the need for clear, accessible medical waste disposal options is growing. An aging population, rising rates of chronic disease and continued demand for convenient, cost-effective care are accelerating the shift toward home-based treatment. That shift creates challenges for managing used sharps, unused medications and other healthcare waste in residential settings.

Within healthcare facilities, medical waste disposal is supported by established processes, trained personnel and dedicated infrastructure. Waste segregation, collection, transportation and disposal are built into daily operations. In residential settings, patients, caregivers and healthcare professionals may each have a role in managing healthcare waste. Responsibilities and disposal requirements vary depending on the waste generated and applicable regulations.

As home healthcare continues to expand, healthcare organizations have an opportunity to ensure waste management practices evolve alongside patient care.

Why Is Home Healthcare Creating New Medical Waste Management Challenges?

Home-based care shifts healthcare waste generation into residential settings, where disposal infrastructure and guidance may be less readily available than in clinical facilities.

Medical waste generated in residential settings generally falls into two categories. The first includes waste produced through professional healthcare services delivered in the home, such as infusion therapy, wound care and hospital-at-home programs. The second includes waste generated by patients and caregivers managing their own care, including self-administered medications, injectable treatments and chronic disease therapies. Both require safe, accessible and practical disposal solutions.

Healthcare leaders are increasingly aware of this challenge. According to a recent survey*, nearly three-quarters of healthcare decision-makers surveyed believe additional standards are needed to support the safe removal of waste from at-home care settings. At the same time, 89% report increasing demand for home healthcare services.

These findings highlight the need for disposal guidance and support systems that keep pace with growing demand for home healthcare. Medical waste management is an important part of patient safety, workplace safety and environmental stewardship wherever care is delivered.

Why Is Safe Medication Disposal Important in Home Healthcare?

Unused medications can create household safety, misuse and environmental concerns when they remain in the home or are discarded improperly. Clear guidance and accessible take-back options can help patients and caregivers manage medications they no longer need.

The survey* found that 81% of healthcare decision-makers believe consumers do not know the appropriate way to dispose of unused prescription medications. Additionally, 58% of consumers surveyed report keeping leftover medications for future use, while 37% believe disposal in household trash or down the drain is acceptable.

These findings point to an opportunity for clearer patient education. As more treatment occurs outside traditional healthcare facilities, patients need guidance on disposal options appropriate to their medications and communities.

Expanding access to medication take-back programs, collection kiosks, mail-back services and community collection events can help make safe disposal more convenient while encouraging responsible waste management practices.

Why Does Safe Sharps Disposal Matter Beyond the Home?

Safe sharps disposal helps protect patients, caregivers and the workers who collect and process residential waste. Patients using injectable therapies for diabetes, weight management and other conditions may generate used needles, syringes and lancets as part of their ongoing care.

At the same time, knowledge gaps remain. The survey* found that while 77% of consumers surveyed have disposed of medical waste at home, only 29% consider themselves very knowledgeable about how to do so safely.

Improper sharps disposal can have consequences beyond the home. Waste and recycling workers routinely encounter improperly discarded needles in residential waste streams, where a single needlestick injury can create health, safety and operational concerns. In New York City alone, at least 49 sanitation workers experienced needlestick injuries in 2026, exceeding the total recorded in all of 2025. Over the previous three years, 140 sanitation workers were reportedly injured by discarded needles while performing their jobs. Safe sharps disposal helps protect not only patients and caregivers but also frontline workers responsible for collecting and processing residential waste.

How Can Healthcare Organizations Integrate Medical Waste Management into the Patient Experience?

Healthcare organizations can integrate waste management into home-based care by identifying the waste a treatment may generate, clarifying responsibilities and connecting patients and care teams with appropriate disposal resources before treatment begins.

Providing disposal instructions alongside treatment guidance can help patients better understand how to handle materials generated throughout their care journey. Clear, plain-language education on medical, sharps and pharmaceutical waste disposal is most useful when paired with practical tools and a clear collection or return option.

Healthcare organizations may also benefit from connecting patients withlocal medication collection locations and appropriate sharps containers and disposal services at the start of treatment. Equipping home healthcare professionals with consistent protocols and educational materials can further support safe waste management practices across residential care settings.

Collaboration will be equally important. Healthcare providers, pharmacies, waste management partners, public health organizations and policymakers all have a role to play in developing solutions that support the safe disposal of healthcare waste generated at home.

What Does the Future of Healthcare Waste Management Look Like?

The future of healthcare will include more care delivered outside traditional healthcare facilities. Supporting that future requires more than clinical innovation. It also requires the infrastructure, education and disposal pathways needed to safely manage healthcare waste wherever care is delivered.

According to the survey*, 88% of healthcare decision-makers surveyed and 70% of consumers surveyed believe improper pharmaceutical waste disposal will increase as more care takes place in the home. These perceptions reinforce the importance of addressing medical waste management as part of broader healthcare planning and home healthcare program development.

How WM Can Support Healthcare Waste Management Beyond the Point of Care

As care moves into the home, clear guidance needs to be paired with practical disposal options. WM's healthcare waste solutions can help organizations connect waste management with broader patient safety and operational planning.

Discover how WM can help your organization support safer disposal practices and patient education.

Learn More About WM's Healthcare Waste Solutions

*The Logit Group, on behalf of WM, conducted a 15-minute online Survey among N=400 healthcare decision-makers in the United States across a variety of roles (e.g., Practice Managers, Owners, Executive Leadership, Facilities Managers, etc.) as well as N=1,500 the general population of healthcare consumers in the United States.
Fieldwork was conducted between Jan. 2-20, 2026

https://mediaroom.wm.com/As-Home-Healthcare-Grows,-Medical-Waste-Challenges-Rise