



# Alcohol swab distribution

**RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICE POLICIES** to facilitate use of sterile alcohol swabs for each injection to reduce transmission of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis C (HCV), and other pathogens, and to prevent bacterial infection from the reuse or non-use of swabs:

- Provide single-use, individually pre-packaged, and sterile alcohol swabs in the quantities requested by clients with no limit on the number of swabs provided per client, per visit. If clients request large quantities of alcohol swabs, make efforts to ensure that the swabs are being used for injection and not for the consumption of the non-beverage alcohol in the swabs.
- Offer sterile alcohol swabs with each needle provided
- Provide pre-packaged safer injection kits (needles/syringes, cookers, filters, ascorbic acid when required, sterile water for injection, alcohol swabs, tourniquets, condoms and lubricant) and also individual safer injection supplies concurrently
- Dispose of used alcohol swabs and other injection equipment in accordance with local regulations for biomedical waste
- Educate clients about the HIV- and HCV-related risks associated with sharing swabs, the risks of bacterial infection if the injection site is not cleaned with an alcohol swab prior to injection, and the correct single-person use of swabs
- Educate clients about the proper disposal of used swabs
- Provide multiple, convenient locations for safe disposal of used equipment

## Key messages

Alcohol swabs are used by people who use drugs to clean an injection site before injection. People also sometimes use a swab to clean their fingers and thumb before an injection and to remove any blood from the injection on their fingers and other surfaces. Sharing and reusing someone else's swabs can put people at risk for infections like HCV. Exact risk of transmission from reusing a swab is not known. People who inject drugs sometimes share swabs, so it is important for needle and syringe programs (NSPs) to educate clients about the potential risks of sharing and reusing swabs.

Proper alcohol swab use is important to help prevent other health complications that may result from not cleaning the skin before injection, such as skin and soft-tissue abscesses and other bacterial infections. Although cleaning the skin with soap and water is effective, people who inject drugs in community settings may not have access to soap and clean water. Distributing sterile alcohol swabs is an important way for NSPs to reduce the risks associated with sharing or reusing alcohol swabs and the risks associated with not cleaning the skin. NSP clients should also be reminded that alcohol swabs are to be used on the skin before injection only; clean, dry, and absorbent pads should be used to stop blood flow after injection.