

Medical Waste Color-Code Chart

Which container each regulated stream belongs in — and what must stay out. Print and post at your point of segregation.

Container	Stream	What goes in	Keep out	Governing rule
Red / red-bag	Regulated medical waste (biohazard)	Blood- or OPIM-saturated items, red-bag RMW, cultures	Sharps, drugs, chemo, ordinary trash	OSHA 29 CFR 1910.1030; DOT UN3291
Sharps (rigid)	Sharps	Needles, syringes w/ needles, lancets, blades	Red-bag waste, pharmaceuticals	OSHA 1910.1030
Blue	Non-hazardous pharmaceutical	Non-controlled, non-RCRA expired/unused meds	Controlled, RCRA-hazardous, chemo	State pharma-waste rules
Black	RCRA-hazardous pharmaceutical	P- & U-listed and characteristic hazardous drugs	Non-haz drugs, trace chemo, sharps	EPA RCRA 40 CFR; Subpart P (266)
Yellow	Trace chemotherapy	RCRA-empty vials, chemo-contaminated PPE/tubing	Bulk chemo, P/U-listed chemo (→ black)	USP <800>; incinerate at permitted facility
Secure / DEA	Controlled substances	Scheduled I-V drugs for non-retrievable destruction	Everything non-controlled	DEA 21 CFR 1317; Form 41

The golden rule of segregation

Cost and compliance are decided at the container. Over-filling the red bag or the hazardous stream with ordinary trash drives up cost; putting a controlled or RCRA-hazardous drug in the wrong bin is a citation. When a drug could belong in more than one stream, the more stringent rule wins (controlled > RCRA-hazardous > non-hazardous).