

HARM REDUCTION FOR THE DRUG USER

To reduce the risk of an increase in AIDS, Australia took the bold step and led the world in the availability and distribution of new syringes to injecting drug users. As a result Australia has the lowest incidence of HIV amongst injecting drug users in the world, less than 2% compared to figures up to 90% in some other countries.

While the availability of clean syringes has halted the spread of HIV infection, it has not halted the spread of hepatitis C (HCV) infection. This is because the HCV virus is much more easily picked up from any sort of blood contact. There are several harm reduction strategies — in addition to clean syringes — that should be followed to reduce the risk of HCV, other blood-borne viruses, and infections.

Promoting harm reduction does not condone illicit drug use. It acknowledges that many people do not want to give up drug use, and that most people are unable to 'just give up' using drugs immediately.

It is a means of reducing the risk of harm to a person so that they are kept alive — and in better health — until they eventually decide to stop their drug use. Health professionals, parents, partners and friends have a role to play in promoting harm reduction to drug users.

A harm reduction approach encourages illicit drug users to adopt safer means than injecting drugs. However, it also acknowledges that many drug users will prefer to inject. Let us look at some of the risks of injecting drug use and ways to minimise them.

Risks of infection

The risk of infection is increased when injecting drugs in public areas or communal areas such as toilets. Plan to use in a private area and clean down the bench area or table that will be used for drug preparation.

Always open a new ampoule of sterile water available at Needle & Syringe Programs. Using tap water can result in fever and infection.

Wash your hands thoroughly before injecting, and use your own alcohol swab to cleanse the injection site before injecting.

Buy your drugs from the same source, and you are more likely to get a known quality and strength. Where possible, inject a small amount first to assess the strength of the drug so you can avoid a potential overdose.

Vein damage

Rotate your injection sites so each vein has time to heal before it is used again. Injecting can also cause bruising and track marks that will indicate to others that you are injecting.

Use the finest needle available, and before injecting, 'draw back' the syringe to make

sure that the needle is in a vein. Sharp pain is likely to indicate you are in an artery instead — immediately take the needle out as arterial injection is extremely dangerous.

Solid material and impurities can cause vein damage. This risk can be reduced by using a wheel filter after dissolving the drug. Using the right wheel filter can also filter out bacteria and lessen the chances of infection. See your Needle & Syringe Program for more information on filtering.

Injecting pills can cause very serious health problems and is discouraged. If you do inject pills, a wheel filter is essential.

Injecting methadone is also very risky, and can cause ulceration and vein damage. If you do inject it, make sure that you dilute it with water. Again, your Needle & Syringe Program can advise of minimising the harms.

Injecting the liquid contents of capsules is not recommended. This causes vein damage as the contents are not water-soluble and cause blockages in the veins.

Because veins have one-way valves, injections should be made with the needle pointing towards the heart i.e.: in the arm the needle points towards the shoulder.

Avoid veins in the legs, back of the hands, penis and neck. It is particularly dangerous to inject into the groin (femoral injection), as damage to an artery is very likely. Needle & Syringe Programs can advise on the best places to inject, even if the safest veins are no longer usable.

Alternatives to injecting

Injecting poses the most risks of all methods of taking drugs as it bypasses all the body's natural defences. Taking a drug by mouth is the safest method, as your stomach acts as a filter and the chances of overdose are much lower. There is no 'rush', and while the overall high may be lessened, the effects of the drug will last longer.

For many drugs, the next safest alternative is snorting (via the nose). Your body can then filter the drug through the nasal membranes, although these can be damaged through constant use.

Another option is shafting, or inserting in the rectum. The anus has many blood vessels and absorbs drugs rapidly, while acting as a filter at the same time. Drugs are usually inserted this way using a syringe, but with the needle taken off.

Overdose and First Aid

If an overdose is suspected, always call an ambulance. If possible, tell the paramedic what drugs have been used. Some drug combinations can be lethal i.e. depressant drugs like heroin and alcohol.

Overdose risks increase when drugs are injected because they act quickly and with greater effect — consider alternatives to injecting

Buy drugs from a reliable source, so you can be more certain about the quality and strength. Always test a small dose first before taking the whole dose.

If a user passes out, is incoherent, has laboured or rattling breathing or you cannot wake them up, prepare for a possible overdose and call an ambulance.

If somebody is unconscious but still breathing, lay them on their side and pull the head back slightly to stretch the neck so that their airways will be unobstructed. If necessary, clear the mouth of vomit or mucous.

Learn CPR as it could save somebody's life while waiting for an ambulance.



Smoking certain drugs is still safer than injecting, as the lung linings act as a filter. Smoking heroin is safer than injecting it, although it is still possible to overdose. The 'rush' is still very rapid with smoking, which increases the risk of dependency, particularly with crystal meth (ice) which is better taken by mouth if possible.

There is a risk of lung damage from smoking cannabis. There is an increased risk smoking with a bong because the smoke is not purified, and is usually inhaled deeper into the lungs (see page 73 for more information).

Other harm reduction tips

Regular drug use may be more harmful than occasional use. The risks of drug use increase as the quantity of drug used increases, along with the possibility of financial problems and criminal activities needed to support an expensive habit.

Don't plan to have a few drinks or get

intoxicated before using drugs, as this increases the chance of risk-taking behaviour, overdose and dangerous interactions between some drugs.

Use of some drugs will encourage sexual activity — practise safe sex at all times.

If you use drugs, think of other people and don't drive use firearms, operate machinery, go swimming, or take part in active or dangerous sports. Use drugs in a safe place, not near railway lines or busy roads.

Ulcers, damaged veins and skin infections always need medical treatment. Sudden onset of fever with tiredness and lack of energy may be due to infection and needs urgent medical attention. Find a non-judgmental doctor or see staff at your Needle & Syringe Program.

Try to have breakfast and at least one decent meal every day. Regular exercise, sports activity or weight training will help keep your

body healthy.

For expecting mothers, babies do not like tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs or prescription drugs. It can result in pre-term babies, underweight or underdeveloped babies, as well as possible deformities. If you become pregnant while using drugs, contact your local hospital as soon as possible for advice.

If your drug use is causing you more hassles than it's worth, consider reducing drug use or detoxing. Contact your Needle & Syringe Program or Alcohol & Drug Information Service (see rear cover) to find out where to get help, or go to your local hospital emergency department.

For information on individual problems regarding injecting drug use, contact the drug users association in your State (see the rear cover). You can keep up to date with information on drugs by receiving the magazines they regularly issue.

Injecting drugs - a guide for users

Never use drugs alone. The majority of injecting drug users will overdose at least once, and a companion can call for help in the event of an overdose.

Do not inject in a public toilet because of the risk of infection and, in the case of overdose, people will not be able to get access to give help.

Use a supervised injecting room if one is available.

Blood-borne viruses can be spread from one person to another with even the slightest blood contact. When injecting drugs, maintain a clear space around you so that you do not come in contact with any other person.

Use your own syringe. Do NOT use a syringe that anyone else has used, including swabs, tourniquets and spoons.

Always use a new syringe. If you must reuse a fit, make sure that you clean it thoroughly first and wash it with bleach. This does not guarantee a clean hit, but it is better than nothing.

If you do not have a clean syringe, consider using the drug by an alternative method such as smoking, shafting or snorting.

Do not share water, it can be contaminated with blood.

Do not share spoons, they can be contaminated with blood.

Do not share swabs, they can be contaminated with blood.

Do not share tourniquets, they can be contaminated with blood.

Do not handle other people's used injecting equipment.

Do not let another person put pressure on your injecting site to stop bleeding as this can transfer infected blood.

Do not assist another person to stop bleeding from the injection site as this can transfer infected blood.

The risk of blood contact is increased if you inject somebody else.

Safely dispose of used syringes, swabs and other items so that they present no risk to other people.

