

INFECTIOUS DISEASE PREVENTION

safe injecting and safe sex practices



Even basic strategies, such as hand washing and cleaning the drug preparation area, can greatly reduce the risk of infections for injecting drug users.

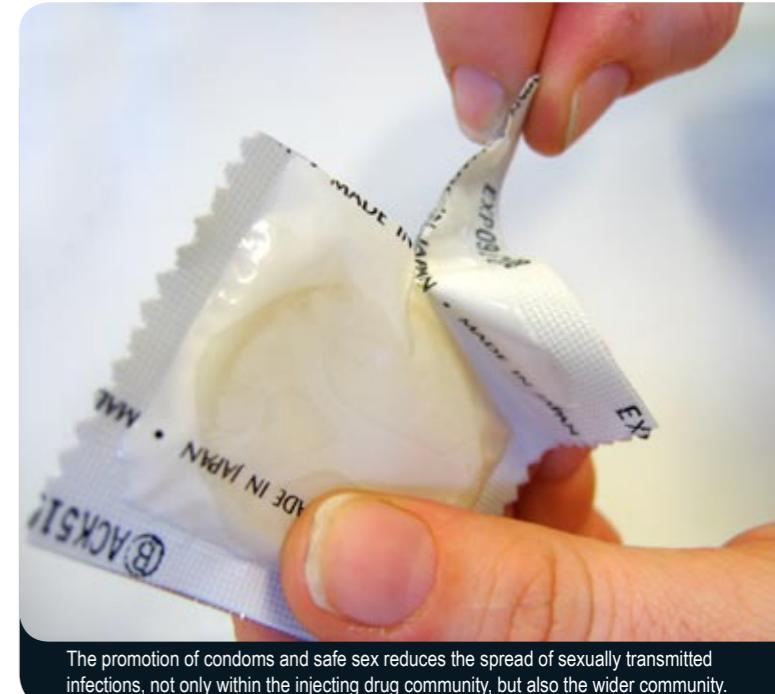


For people who insist on injecting illicit drugs, Needle and Syringe Programs can advise on the safest way to do so, and provide sterile equipment and safe disposal.

There are many practical strategies available to reduce potential harms that can arise from illicit drug use. These strategies can safeguard the health of illicit drug users until they reach a point where they choose to discontinue their drug use.



Safe disposal of used injecting equipment not only protects the user, but minimises the risk of infectious diseases spreading to the wider community.



The promotion of condoms and safe sex reduces the spread of sexually transmitted infections, not only within the injecting drug community, but also the wider community.

SAFER INJECTING TIPS

NEVER SHARE ANY EQUIPMENT. This includes syringes, swabs, cotton wool and filters. Even someone's finger on a vein or a tourniquet can transmit the hepatitis C virus.

USE NEW STERILE EQUIPMENT: a new syringe, sterile water, filter, cotton wool, spoon and antiseptic swab (if re-use is absolutely essential, the fit should be sterilised). Users should have their own equipment, such as tourniquets, spoons etc. which they keep sterile and never share with anyone

WASH THE DRUG PREPARATION AREA with diluted bleach, or at least warm, soapy water

WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE AND AFTER INJECTING with soap, and before and after touching anybody else

SWAB THE INJECTION SITE with an antiseptic swab, once, and in one direction only (it's the evaporation that kills germs, not rubbing the spot)

APPLY PRESSURE AFTER INJECTING to the vein, using a clean cotton-wool ball (not a swab, as the antiseptic can stop the blood from clotting)

ENSURE YOU HAVE NEW EQUIPMENT Stock up on clean fits from your Needle & Syringe Program or local pharmacy to avoid sterilising old gear.

Diseases

Diseases of most concern with injecting drug use are HIV (AIDS) and hepatitis C. Using safe injecting practice as an injecting drug user, and having sex as safely as possible, are the only real protections against these diseases and other infections.

Australia leads the world in prevention of HIV (AIDS) transmission in injecting drug users, mainly due to community education and adoption of harm reduction policies. Less than 2% of Australian injecting drug users are HIV positive.

Abstinence is the best form of safety, but when this is not possible, then knowledge of safe practices can assist in reducing the risk of exposure to users and their families. Further information about HIV (AIDS) can be obtained from the Australian Intravenous League Member Organisations – check their website at www.aivl.org.au

However, when drug users spend some time on the streets they may also be exposed to other infectious diseases which contribute to ill health e.g. scabies, body lice and nits. Your Public Health Unit can advise on treatment and eradication of these. Ring the Alcohol & Drug Information Service in your State for more information (see rear cover).

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a blood-borne virus that affects the liver, causing serious liver damage in some people. Liver cancer has also been reported. The liver is the organ responsible for cleaning the blood and storing nutrients needed by the body, such as proteins, carbohydrates and fats. HCV exists as a number of different strains or types, and is able to survive for a long time outside the body or blood. A tiny amount of invisible or microscopic blood is enough to transmit the virus, and it is therefore easy to transmit between people. Current estimates are that hepatitis C infects over 50% of injecting drug users in Australia. Call the Hepatitis Council in your State (see rear cover) for advice and information on injecting practices and safe drug use, treatment and living with hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C symptoms and effects will vary depending on the strain, the user's health and the state of their immune system. A person can contract multiple infections of hepatitis C, each one increasing the risk of serious illness. Over time, hepatitis C infection may cause levels of liver damage with symptoms ranging from mild to serious. About a quarter of those infected will suffer liver damage (cirrhosis) after 20 years, and there is the possibility that 10% overall will progress to liver failure or cancer, but

treatment outcomes are improving from further research.

Reducing the risk of hepatitis C and other blood-borne diseases

Strategies that protect the user against hepatitis C will also protect against other blood-to-blood transmissible diseases.

Infected users can avoid transmitting hepatitis C to other users, friends or family. Being diagnosed with hepatitis C is no excuse for not taking precautions – but it does take a bit of effort and organisation, and following some important rules, such as the Safer Injecting Tips on this page.

In country areas, sources of clean injecting equipment (or indeed any drug resources) may be difficult to find. Contact the Alcohol and Drugs Information Service in your State. Advice can be obtained from Needle & Syringe Programs as well as drug user services (see rear cover).

Safe disposal of injecting gear

Dispose of the used equipment such as 'fits', cotton wool, and swabs, cleanly and carefully in a *sharps container* (equipment disposal containers) where there is no danger of anyone else coming into contact with it.

Pick the syringe up by the barrel — firmly to avoid dropping it — never by the tip. Never recap or bend the needle, as these

are common ways to sustain needle-stick injuries. Sharps containers can be obtained from Needle & Syringe Programs or some pharmacies.

Other things to avoid

For non-injecting drug users, the risk of infection is somewhat lower, but are by no means non-existent. There is a risk of hepatitis C transmission through any form of blood-to-blood contact e.g. sharing the same device for snorting coke or speed, anal insertion of drugs (known as 'shafting', 'squirting' or 'shelving'), or sharing toothbrushes or razors. Household transmission and sexual transmission of the hepatitis C virus are rare. For up to date information, contact the Hepatitis Council, ADIS or your local Area Health Service in your State.

When dealing with body fluids i.e. vomit or blood spills, you should wear disposable gloves and clean the contaminated surface with bleach. Wash laundry items in hot water, using detergent or disinfectant as appropriate.

The Clinical Nurse Specialist in your Area Alcohol and Drug Unit or Public Health Unit should be able to advise you, should you have any concerns. Ring the Alcohol & Drug Information Service in your State for more information (see rear cover).

SAFE SEX TIPS

Safe sex practices and sexual health are important for all members of the community, and are even more essential to maintain if you are using drugs and/or working in the sex industry.

HIV (AIDS) transmission rates in the homosexual community have fallen and are relatively stable due to the adoption of safe sex practices. The heterosexual community, however, has lagged behind in the adoption of safe sex practices.

Teenagers are a group of great concern. They often think they are invincible and that nothing will happen to them, so it is important to emphasise that anyone is at risk of contracting or transmitting blood-borne viruses and other infections, unless they practice safe sex and low-risk drug use.

Condoms are essential for any type of sexual contact – whether vaginal or anal, as they act as a barrier and prevent the exchange of body fluids. Oral sex has a lower risk, but must be avoided if either partner has a gum infection, ulcers or sores. Do not share sex 'toys'.

When a new sexual relationship begins – even if both partners intend to remain monogamous – both partners should be tested for HIV (AIDS). Continue to use condoms until another test in six months time returns a negative result.

In long-term relationships, it is recommended that condoms should ALWAYS be used if either partner has been, or still is, injecting drugs (even once), or has other sexual partners (even if the possibility of infection from these seems remote). Your local Family Planning and Sexual Health Clinics can offer advice and information on safe sex and sexual health matters.