

- Regular drug use may be more harmful than occasional use. The risks of drug use increase as the quantity of drug used increases
- Regular drug use increases the chance that a person will become involved in criminal activities
- Don't plan to have a few drinks or get intoxicated before using drugs as this increases the chance of risk taking behaviour
- If you use drugs think of other people and do not drive or use firearms. You are at risk of injury if you drive or ride a bike, 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
- Use of some drugs will encourage sexual activity...practice safe sex at all times
- Ulcers and damaged veins and skin infections need medical treatment. Sudden onset of fever with tiredness and lack of energy may be due to infection and needs urgent medical attention. Tell the doctor what you have been injecting
- 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
- Babies do not like tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs or prescription drugs. It can result in pre-term babies, underweight and underdeveloped babies as well as deformities. If you become pregnant while using drugs contact your local hospital as soon as possible for advice
- Do you feel relaxed and contented when you use drugs but tense and unhappy when the effect wears off? Perhaps, as a short term measure, your doctor could prescribe something that reduces the tension so that you can enjoy a feeling of wellbeing
- Drug use can cause financial problems for the user

If your drug use is causing you more hassles than it's worth, consider reducing drug use or detoxing. Contact NUAA or Family Drug Support 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:

**NUAA on 02 9557 1476 or 1800 644 413.** You can keep up to date with information on drugs by getting a free copy of their publication, "User's News".



# Harm Minimisation for the user

The concept of harm reduction is not new; seat belts in cars, filters in cigarettes and fences around swimming pools are all about harm reduction. The concept of harm reduction and minimisation for drug users was born in 1986 with the realisation that the HIV virus was being spread through the sharing of syringes amongst heroin injecting users. To reduce the risk of an increase in AIDS cases, 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 and other disease transmission. Some strategies also reduce other health risks associated with injecting drug use.

Promoting harm minimisation 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. It is a means of reducing the risk of harm to a person so that they are kept alive, in better health and if they eventually decide to stop their drug use, they will not suffer serious consequences from their drug use. Health professionals, parents, partners and friends have a role to play in promoting harm minimisation to drug users. Let us look at some of the risks of drug use and ways to minimise them.

## Injecting drugs - a guide for users

- Never use drugs alone. The majority of 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 born 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
- The use of bleach does not guarantee that a syringe is free of infective material
- Use a new syringe. In desperation, if you reuse a fit make sure that you clean it thoroughly first and wash it with bleach
- If you do not have a clean syringe consider using the drug by an alternative method such as smoking 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

## Risks of infection

- The risk of infection is increased when injecting 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
- Always open a new ampoule of 'Water for Injection'. This is guaranteed sterile. Using tap water can result in fever and infection
- Wash your hands thoroughly before injecting
- 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

## Vein damage

- Vary the site of injection to minimise the risk of vein damage. Injecting can cause bruising and 'track marks' that will indicate to others that you are injecting
- Use the finest needle available
- Before injecting 'draw back' the syringe to make sure that the needle is in a vein

- Solid material and impurities can cause vein damage. This risk can be reduced by using a pill filter after dissolving the drug. Using a wheel filter can reduce bacterial contamination and reduce the risk of infection
- Injecting methadone can cause ulceration and damage veins. If you do inject it, make sure that you dilute it with water
- Injecting pills can damage veins, always use a pill filter to get rid of the solid material in the pill.
- Injecting the liquid contents of capsules 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 ie: 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 as damage to an artery is very likely

## Overdose and First Aid

- If an overdose is suspected ALWAYS CALL AN AMBULANCE. If possible tell the paramedic what drugs have been used
- A safe dose of a drug can be deadly when used with other drugs or alcohol
- Overdose risks increase when drugs are injected because they act quickly and with greater effect
- Buy drugs from a reliable source so you can be sure of the quality and strength. If using a new supplier test a smaller dose first
- If somebody who has used drugs or alcohol passes out, is incoherent, has laboured or rattling breathing or you cannot wake them up, suspect an 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 breathing will be unobstructed. If necessary, clear the mouth of vomit or mucus
- Learn CPR as it could save somebody's life while waiting for an ambulance

## Other ideas

- Taking a drug by mouth is safer than injecting it
- Smoking heroin is safer than injecting it
- Smoking crack is riskier than snorting cocaine
- 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